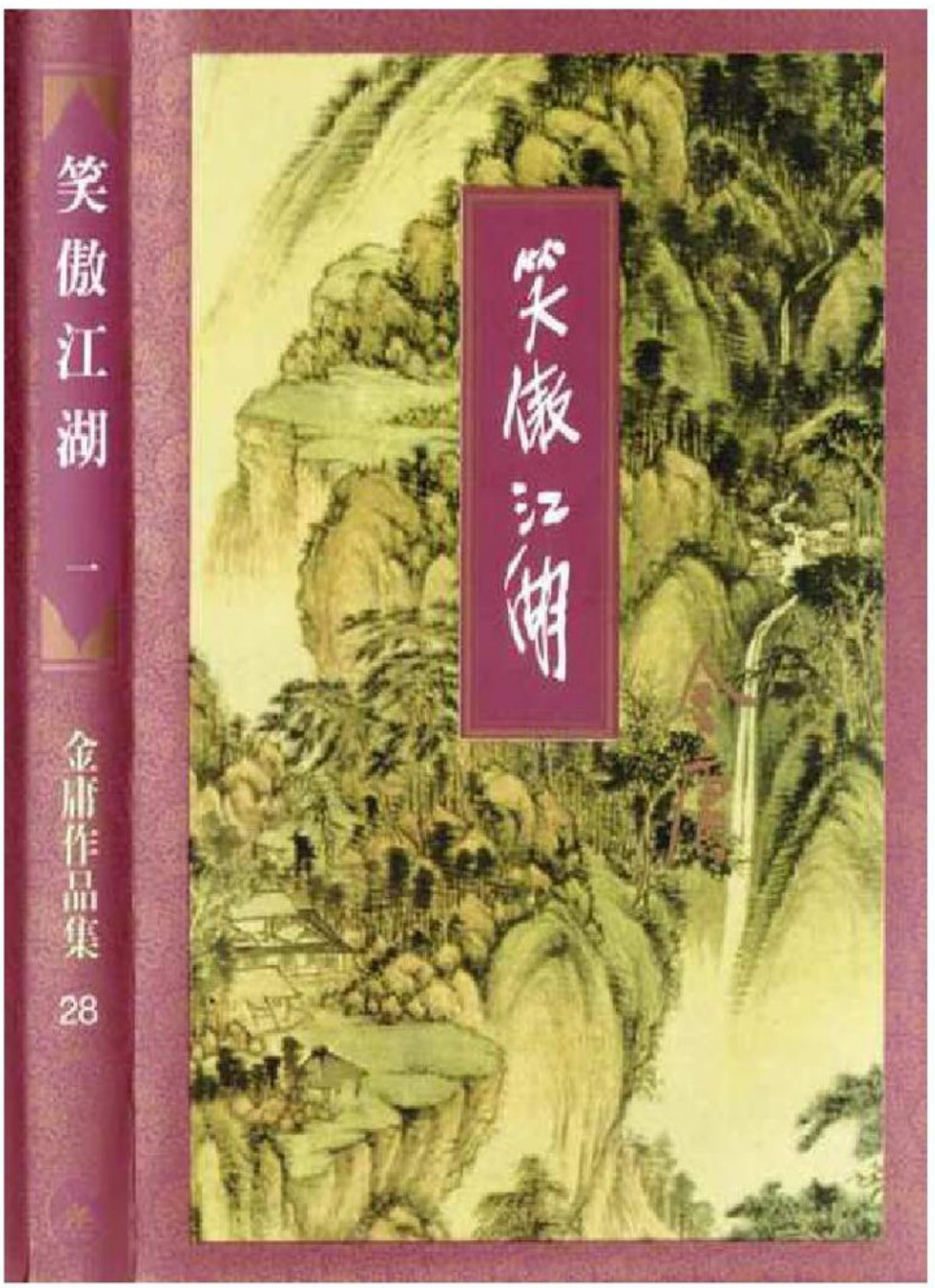
Xiào Ào Jiāng Hú
Smiling Proud Wanderer Vol 01

by

Jin Yong



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Bliss

Editor:

HHaung

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Ebook Compiler's note.

This was originally translated by and posted online by

- Lanny Lin (http://www.lannyland.com, http://blog.lannyland.com) (Chapters 1 to 21)
- Pokit (http://www.spcnet.tv/forums/showthread.php/17771-Smiling-Proud-Wanderer-Unabridged) (Chapters 22 to 40)
- Bliss (Chapters 30,31)
- Editor: HHaung

I compiled it as part of an ongoing effort to create a repository of the online fan translations of wuxia fiction in a more convenient format for offline reading.

Unfortunately there does not appear to a large commercial market for English wuxia translations, so we are beholden to by Lanny, Pokit and others for their efforts to bring the work of Jin Yong, Gu Long et al to an English speaking audience.

Additionally, I would note that the work involved goes far beyond just translation.

Chinese cannot simply be directly translated to English, so am grateful for the notes explaining idioms in addition to notes on geography, culture and historical context.

I have left the translations as I found them with the following caveats.

- I added the pictures and chapter descriptions from Lanny's website
- I received chapters 1 to 21 in a MS Word document from Lanny which included footnotes, whereas I assembled Chapters 22 onwards from the online version. The online version used inline notation, but I changed the inline explanations to footnotes for consistency's sake.

Other Translations

We have a repository of some of the existing online translations, including links and many downloads in eBook format.

http://wuxiatranslations.wikispaces.com

There is also a sister site, also with downloads but more emphasis on original translations and forum discussions.

http://wuxiasociety.com

Other good sources for translations are

http://www.lannyland.com

http://www.spcnet.tv/forums/forumdisplay.php/29-Wuxia-Translations

http://xiaoshuo.genreverse.com

http://haddjo.freehostia.com/joomla_1.5.3/index.php

http://mywuxia.com

Helping out with Wuxia Translations At Wuxia Translations, we are always looking volunteers, both for translation and eBook compilation/formatting For Translators we need.

- Native level Mandarin
  - Excellent written English
  - Understanding of, and enthusiasm for, wuxia, martial arts, Chinese literature and history.
  - Ability to take the initiative to do further research regarding the terms and idioms used in Chinese to avoid making literal translations.
  - Ability to collaborate/ share work.

For help with complilation and formatting we just need

- Web access.
- Moderate profiency with MS Word
- Ability to follow standardized formats
- Ability to collaborate/ share work.

Our ultimate goal is to get all the major wuxia works translated and available to English readers in one location If you or a friend would like to help, please get in touch at N1ghtT1iger71@gmail.com

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Chapter 1: Massacre

Translated by Lanny Lin



The young man smiled and cracked his whip in the air cockily. Answering the command, the white horse neighed happily and dashed along the stone slab road. "Escort Shi," one of the guards yelled out, "how about bringing back a wild boar, so we can all have a feast!"

Spring was always a relaxing time of the year. As the breeze gently brushed the willow trees and wild flowers, it filled the air of the southland with a pleasant scent of the season.

The West Gate Boulevard of Fuzhou[1] was a stone slab road that extended all the way to the west gate of the town. A huge mansion stood south of the street, in front of which a tall flagpole stood on either side of the entrance. The flagpoles were about twenty feet tall, each with a huge green banner streaming in the wind. The banner on the left was embroidered in yellow silk, bearing the image of a majestic lion. As the banner fluttered back and forth in the wind, the lion seemed as though it had come alive and was about to jump down at any moment. Just above the lion's head was a pair of bats, embroidered in black silk; they appeared to be flapping their wings in the air. The banner on the right bore four huge characters in black that read "Fortune Prestige Escort House," all written in a bold, vigorous hand.

The mansion itself had a large vermilion gate with teacup-sized copper studs which sparkled in the bright sunlight. Above the gate, the same "Fortune Prestige Escort House" characters were inscribed in gold lacquer on a huge sign with the word "Headquarters" engraved in smaller print just below. Beyond the gate were two rows of benches bordering a path, and sitting upon those benches were eight guards in house uniforms, their faces animated with excitement.

Sounds of hoof beats came from the backyard of the court. All eight guards sprang up and rushed out the gate. Five horses galloped out from the side-door on the west of the mansion and stopped directly in front of the gate. Leading the pack was a beautiful horse, white as snow, with a silver bridle and stirrups. A young man wearing silk clothing, roughly eighteen years of age, sat on the horse with a sword hanging from his belt and a bow strapped onto his back. A hunting falcon perched on his left shoulder as the horse strode along the street. The four horsemen following him were all dressed in tight, black outfits.

"The Young Master is going hunting!" three guards shouted in unison.

The young man smiled and cracked his whip in the air cockily. Answering the command, the white horse neighed happily and dashed along the stone slab road.

"Escort Shi," one of the guards yelled out, "how about bringing back a wild

boar, so we can all have a feast!”

A forty-year-old horseman, trailing behind, grinned back. “Don’t worry! I will be sure to save the boar’s tail for you. Just don’t get drunk before we get back.”

Amid the loud laughter, the five horsemen vanished like the wind.

Just after they exited the town gate, Lin Pingzhi,[2] the Young Master of the Escort House, spurred his horse lightly; the steed picked up speed and soon left the rest of the pack far behind. After riding up a small slope, he set the falcon to work. Minutes later, a pair of yellow rabbits was flushed out from the bushes. Lin Pingzhi quickly grabbed the bow from his back. Pulling out an arrow from his saddlebag, he took aim and shot in one smooth action. One rabbit down, one more to go. But by the time he pulled out another arrow and was ready to shoot again, the other rabbit had disappeared behind the bushes.

Escort Zheng rode by with a smile. “Nice shot, Young Master!” he praised.

“Young Master, hurry, we’ve found pheasants here!” Henchman Bai shouted in the woods to the left.

Lin Pingzhi rushed over and saw a pheasant flying out from the bushes, heading directly toward his head. He pulled out an arrow rapidly and fired at the pheasant but missed. Reflexively, he lashed his whip at the pheasant. With a cracking sound, the pheasant fell to the ground, its bright and colorful feathers scattering in all directions. All five men cheered.

“What a swift lash! Even a large griffon wouldn’t escape that,” Escort Shi exclaimed.

The party hunted in the woods for over four hours. Intending to let the Young Master have a good time, the two escorts, Shi and Zheng, and the two henchmen, Bai and Chen, always drove the prey toward the young man, even when they themselves had the better shot. By the end of the hunt, Lin Pingzhi had shot two more rabbits and two more pheasants. But Young Master Lin wanted to hunt more. Not finding enough excitement from small prey, he yearned for larger game.

“Let's go a bit deeper into the woods, and see what we can find,” he exclaimed eagerly.

Escort Shi thought to himself, “If we go too deep into the woods, as the Young Master wishes, he probably won’t quit until after dark. Surely, the Madam will complain when we get back. That won’t be good.” So he replied, “It is quite late already. There are lots of sharp rocks around that might damage the hooves of your white horse. Why don’t we try our luck again early tomorrow morning?”

He knew that it would be very hard to dissuade the stubborn Young Master, but Lin Pingzhi loved his white horse so much that he wouldn’t risk any chance of injuring his precious pet. The colt had been given to Lin Pingzhi as a present on his seventeenth birthday two years ago. It had come from a foreign country, and had cost his grandmother in Luoyang, a fair amount of gold.

Just as Shi had expected, his suggestion worked.

“My Snow Dragon is clever enough to not step on sharp rocks, but I am not so sure about your horses. Alright, let’s head back then. We wouldn’t want Henchman Chen to crack his bottom somewhere on those sharp rocks, would we?” grinned Lin Pingzhi, patting his horse on the neck.

Howling with laughter, all five turned around and started to head back home. Lin Pingzhi rode ahead of everyone else, but did not take the same route by which they had come. Instead, he turned north and sprinted forward. Feeling satisfied after some rapid riding, he finally reined in the horse and let it trot slowly.

The sign of a wine shop emerged from one side of the road, not far ahead.

“Young Master, how about a drink here? The fresh rabbits and pheasants we’ve got would go perfectly with some good wine,” Escort Zheng suggested.

“So, you didn’t come out for hunting, but rather for drinking, did you? I suppose if I don’t bribe you with some drinks, you wouldn’t want to come out again tomorrow.” Lin Pingzhi grinned as he dismounted and started walking toward the wine shop.

Normally, the owner of the wine shop, Old Cai, would have hurried out to take the reins and flattered Lin with some praise. “Well lookee thar, the Young Master’s gotten so much game today! Ain’t he great! There ain’t many who can match his skills,” Old Cai would exclaim. But today, when they came to the door, they were greeted with complete silence. A girl, dressed in green, stood by the wine vat with her hair done up in two buns, and with a wooden hairpin holding each in place; she appeared to be busy fussing with it. Her back was towards them and she seemed to have no intention of turning around.

“Where is Old Cai? Get out and tether our horses,” Escort Zheng yelled impatiently.

Henchmen Bai and Chen pulled out a bench, brushed off the dust with their sleeves, and let Lin Pingzhi sit down. The two escorts sat with Lin Pingzhi while the two henchmen sat down at another table. Coughing sounds floated out from the backroom, and moments later, a gray-haired old man walked out.

“Welcome, sirs. Can I bring you some wine?” the old man greeted the group of five in a distinctly northern accent.

“Do we look like we are here for tea?” Escort Zheng retorted. “Of course we want wine. Get us three jugs of Bamboo Green.[3] Where’s Old Cai? What’s going on? Are you the new owner here?”

“Yes, sir! Coming right up! Wan’er, bring three jugs of Bamboo Green,” the old man called out at the girl. “To be frank with you misters, my name is Sa. I was born in this town, but I left to be a trader when I was young. Recently, my son and my daughter-in-law both passed away. I figured that no matter how tall a tree is, its leaves will always fall to the roots, so I brought my granddaughter back to my hometown. But since I’ve been gone for over forty some years, my relatives and my friends had either passed away or left town. Luckily, the previous owner of this wine shop, Old Cai, happened to want out, so he sold it to me for thirty taels[4] of silver. I am finally back now. I feel happy just listening to the hometown dialect. But it’s so embarrassing that I’ve totally forgotten the dialect myself.”

The girl in the green robe came back with a wooden tray. She set down the bowls and chopsticks, and then placed three jugs of wine on the table. When she finished, she walked away with her head down, never even sneaked a peek at the customers all the while. Lin Pingzhi watched as the girl walked away. She had a slim figure, but her skin was dark and rough. Pox marks covered her face, which made it appear very ugly. Lin Pingzhi thought that the reason she was so rigid was probably because she had only started waiting on tables not too long ago, so he paid no more attention to her.

Escort Shi brought out a pheasant and a yellow rabbit, and handed them to old man Sa. "Clean them up and cook them well," he ordered.

"Yes, sir! Right away! Would you like some jerky and peanuts to go with the wine, sirs?" old man Sa asked.

Wan'er placed some beef jerky and peanuts on the table, not waiting for old man Sa's order.

"Our Young Mister Lin here is the Young Master of the Fortune Prestige Escort House. He always aids the needy and assists the weak. Money, to him, is like dirt. If you cook the two dishes well and make his stomach happy, you can easily make back that thirty taels investment you spent in a matter of months," Escort Zheng introduced.

"Oh, yes, yes! Many thanks!!" old man Sa answered cheerfully as he picked up the pheasant and the rabbit and went into the kitchen.

Escort Zheng poured the wine into all three cups. Raising his own cup, he poured it all down his throat, then after smacking his lips a few times, he said contentedly, "The owner has changed, but fortunately the wine is still the same."

He poured himself another cup and was just about to drink it, when suddenly, the drum of hoof beats rose from a distance and then came to an abrupt stop outside the shop. Two horsemen had ridden in from the north. Traveling at a blazing speed, they had arrived at the small shop in no time at all.

"Hey, it's a wine shop. Let's go in for a couple of drinks," one of the riders shouted.

Escort Shi recognized that the speaker had a distinct accent of western Sichuan.[5] He turned around and spotted two men in purple robes. They tied the reins of their horses to the big banyan tree outside the shop and walked in. Giving the escorts a casual glance, they made a big display of sitting down. Both had a strip of white cloth wrapped around their foreheads. At first glance, with their purple robes, they seemed to be fairly cultured people, but since both had bare legs showing in the open and bare feet in hemp shoes, they were unlikely to be so.[6] Escort Shi knew that most people from Sichuan dressed in this manner. The strips of white cloths on their foreheads were worn in mourning for the death[7] of Marquis Zhuge Liang.[8] The Marquis did so many great things for the people of Sichuan and was so well respected that even a thousand years after his death, people still wore white mourning cloths on their foreheads in his memory.

Lin Pingzhi had never seen people dressed like this before. “Their dress looks neither civilian nor martial. It’s very strange indeed,” he thought to himself.

“Wine, get me some wine! So many damn mountains here. Our horses are really tired out!” the younger of the two yelled out.

“What can I get for you?” Wan’er walked to their table and asked. She looked down at the floor while asking the question, so that the two could not see her face. Her voice was low, but sounded very clear and pleasant. The younger man was dazed for a second. Unexpectedly, his right hand shot out and raised Wan’er’s chin.

“What a pity!” He snickered.

Wan’er gasped and quickly drew herself back.

The younger man’s companion burst into laughter. “Brother Yu, this chick has a nice body, but as for her face, look how pockmarked it is!! Just like the inside of a pomegranate!” The younger man laughed even louder.

Lin Pingzhi’s anger flared. He slapped the table hard and shouted, “What kind of creatures are you, you two blind scoundrels? How dare you to come to

Fuzhou and behave so ill-manneredly?”

“Hey, Jia Junior, somebody seems really upset. Who do you think this sissy is referring to?” the younger fellow, Yu, said with a smirk.

Lin Pingzhi was fair of face, and looked much like his mother. Even under normal circumstances, he would have slapped someone just for staring at him. Hearing the word sissy, his temper flared. He grabbed a tin kettle from the table and hurled it at the two men. Yu shifted back slightly; the kettle missed him and sailed out the door, landing on the meadow outside. Wine from the kettle splashed everywhere. Escorts Shi and Zheng sprang up immediately and rushed up to the two men.

“This boy should play a little bitch in the opera. I bet you he would seduce quite a few men. But I doubt he’s any good at fighting.” Yu grinned sneeringly.

“This is the Young Master Lin from the Fortune Prestige Escort House. You’ve really got the nerve to offend him!” Escort Zheng hollered. As he spat out the last word, his left fist was already on its way toward Yu’s face. Yu deflected the punch with his left palm, then grabbed Zheng’s wrist and pulled hard. Escort Zheng lost his balance and fell toward the table. Yu then struck Zheng’s neck with his left elbow. With a crash, the table collapsed to the ground, along with Zheng.

Although Zheng was not in the top echelon of fighters at the Escort House, he was not at the bottom either. Seeing that Escort Zheng had been knocked down by Yu within just one move, Escort Shi knew the two would make tough opponents.

“Friends, who are you?” he asked. “If you are also the members of the Martial World, haven’t you heard of the Fortune Prestige Escort House?”

“Fortune Prestige Escort House? Never heard of it. What the hell is that?” Yu smirked.

“We are in the business of teaching manners to lowlifes such as you,” Lin Pingzhi leapt over with a roar. He struck out with his left hand, but before fully extending his arm, his right hand struck out from underneath his left hand. This

maneuver was called “Cloud Concealed Glare” and was a move from the Lin Family’s Kung Fu style of Universal Hands.

“Ho! This sissy boy actually knows a few tricks,” Yu exclaimed mockingly, blocking the blow with his left arm and stretching out his right hand to grab Lin Pingzhi’s shoulder.

Lin Pingzhi lowered his right shoulder in evasion, and attempted to punch Yu with his left fist. Yu ducked his head from the punch, but to his surprise, Lin Pingzhi’s fist opened and changed from a punch into a palm strike. With the move called “Flowers in the Fog,” he slapped Yu hard across the face.

Now Yu went berserk. He threw a kick at Lin Pingzhi, who stepped to the right and returned a kick at Yu. While the two fought, Escort Shi had already engaged in a fight with Jia, and Henchman Bai helped Escort Zheng up from the ground. Swearing at the top of his lungs, Zheng leapt forward and joined Lin Pingzhi in the fight against Yu.

“Go help Escort Shi! I can handle this punk!” Lin Pingzhi shouted.

Escort Zheng knew that the Young Master always wanted to best others, and did not want extra help, so he picked up a broken table leg and swung it at Jia’s head. In the meantime, the two henchmen had run outside. One took Lin Pingzhi’s sword, which was hanging from the saddle, while the other grabbed a hunting fork, and then both started pouring out all manner of profanity at the top of their lungs. Retainers of the Escort House were not good fighters, but because they were the ones shouting out the escort songs during trips, they all had loud voices. They cursed in the local dialect. The two men from Sichuan had no clue as to what they were saying, but they knew that it must have been something quite uncomplimentary.

Lin Pingzhi focused on using moves from the Universal Hands style to fight Yu. He had practiced this form and beaten many escorts in the Escort House. This was partly because this form of martial arts was indeed excellent, and partly because no one from the Escort House, who valued his employment, was stupid enough to beat the Young Master, thus, even though Lin Pingzhi had a good

understanding of the form, he did not have much actual fighting experience. He had also fought some local rascals in Fuzhou before; however, no street thug could prevail against the fighting style of the great Lin Family. In less than three moves, they would all end up running away with either a swollen face or a bloody nose. But things were quite different this time. After only a dozen or so moves, Lin Pingzhi had to swallow his pride and admit that his opponent was really tough.

While the two exchanged punches, Yu kept taunting Lin Pingzhi with insults. "Hey, buddy! The more I look at you, the more you look like a girl dressed as a guy. Look at those lovely cheeks of yours. Why don't we stop fighting, so I can give you a big kiss? What do you say?"

Lin Pingzhi was enraged. He glanced over at Escorts Shi and Zheng, only to find that they were not faring well, even though it was two against one. Zheng had been punched hard on the nose; blood was all over his face and his clothes. Lin Pingzhi hastened his moves and, unexpectedly, was able to slap Yu in the face a second time. It was a heavy slap.

"Son of a turtle!" Yu snarled. "I was just playing with you, you loser. You want to fight for real now?" He suddenly changed his tactics and sped up his moves. Punches poured down upon Lin Pingzhi like a thunderstorm.

The two fought from the inside of the shop to the outside. Seeing a punch aimed directly at his solar plexus, Lin Pingzhi remembered the release-block technique his father had taught him, so he tried to block it with his left arm, but Yu's punch was so powerful that he failed to stop it. The punch sent a shock throughout his entire spine, and before he was able to gather himself, Yu's left hand grabbed him by the collar and jerked him down hard. Lin Pingzhi's torso caved in to Yu's strength and bent forward. In the next second, Yu's right arm was already pushing down on the back of Lin Pingzhi's neck with a move called the "Iron Threshold."

"You son of a turtle! If you kowtow[9] to me and call me Great Uncle three times, I might let you go." Yu laughed scornfully.

Escorts Shi and Zheng were stunned. They wanted to rush over and rescue Lin Pingzhi, but were kept at bay by Jia's nonstop kicks and punches.

Henchman Bai thrust the hunting fork at Yu's back. "Punk, let go of him! Who the hell do you think you are…?" he yelled loudly.

Yu threw a reverse kick with his left foot, which knocked the fork out of Bai's grip and sent it flying into the air. He immediately followed with another backward kick, using his right foot, sending Henchman Bai rolling to the ground.

"You stinking turtle egg god damned bastard! The hell with you! Your grandma has no eyeballs!" Henchman Chen started cursing furiously. But with each curse, he took a step back, so after eight or nine of them, he was already far from the scene of the fight.

"Hey, sissy boy, are you going to kowtow or not?" Yu laughed. He pushed down even harder, pressing Lin Pingzhi's head almost to the ground. Lin Pingzhi tried to punch at Yu's stomach, but the punches always fell a few inches short. Lin felt unbearable pain from his neck as if it was going to break. Sparkles glittered in front of his eyes and his eardrums were filled with buzzing sounds. He clawed and scratched like a wild cat, when suddenly, his fingers came upon a hard object that was strapped on his shin. Without thinking, he pulled it out and stabbed it at Yu with all his might.

Yu let out a sudden shriek and let go of Lin Pingzhi. Dread and terror covered his face as Yu stumbled back in disbelief. The dagger had pierced through his stomach all the way, leaving only the handle showing. He was facing west, and the golden handle of the dagger glinted crazily in the rays of the setting sun. He opened his mouth wide, but no sound came out. He reached for the dagger with his hand, but then paused, too afraid to touch the shining handle.

Stumbling back several steps, Lin Pingzhi also looked on in shock. His heart almost jumped out of his throat. Jia and the two escorts stopped fighting and looked at Yu in astonishment. Yu finally gathered enough courage to grab the protruding handle. Blood gushed from the wound as he pulled out the dagger.

The onlookers cried out in disbelief.

"Jia…Jia…Tell my father, se…seek…vengeance…for…!" Yu hissed before dropping the dagger and falling forward onto the ground. His torso twitched a few times and finally stopped moving.

"Brother Yu, Brother Yu!" Jia rushed to his side and cried out bitterly.

"Get your weapons!" Escort Shi whispered. He darted to his horse and drew out his long knife. As an experienced escort, he knew only too well that Jia would stop at nothing to avenge the death of his companion.

Jia glared murderously at Lin Pingzhi for a few seconds, and then quickly retrieved the dagger from the ground and dashed to his horse. He mounted in a hurry, and without wasting time to untie the reins he cut the horse loose with a swift slash of the dagger. Jia spurred his horse hard, and within moments, both the horse and its rider disappeared into the northern horizon.

Henchman Chen walked up to Yu's body and kicked it hard, sending it rolling over. Blood continued to gush from the wound.

"You big moron, how dare you insult our Young Master? Now you've learned your lesson."

But Lin Pingzhi had never killed anyone before. His face turned pale with fright. "Escort Shi…what shall we do? I never…I didn't mean to kill him." His voice trembled.

Escort Shi pondered on the matter, "The Fortune Prestige Escort House has been around for three generations. Getting into fights and having people die while on the job is simply unavoidable. But normally the victims are either bandits or unorthodox members of the Martial World, and these fights usually happen in some remote mountain or deep forest. Afterwards, we simply bury the corpses and forget about the whole thing. Of course, the bandits would never go to the authorities and report the killing. But this time, the victim is obviously not a bandit, and the scene is close to a populated area. Murder is no small crime. Even the son of a governor or mayor wouldn't be able to get off easily if they committed such a crime, let alone the Young Master of an Escort

House.” Reflecting upon these facts, he came to a decision.

“Let’s move the body into the shop,” he said with a frown. “It’s too close to the road here. We don’t want anyone to see this.”

Luckily it was already quite late, and there was no one passing by. Henchmen Bai and Chen hauled the body into the shop.

“Young Master, do you have any money on you?” Escort Shi whispered to Lin Pingzhi.

“Yeah, I do!” Lin Pingzhi answered anxiously, as he took all of his money out in a hurry. There were about twenty taels of silver in all.

Escort Shi took the silver and walked into the shop. Setting the money on the table, he said, “Old Sa, this outsider was harassing your granddaughter, and our Young Master was just trying to help. He didn’t want to kill the man, but he had no choice. All of us witnessed the entire event. The incident originated because of you, so if anybody blows the whistle, no one will get away with it. Take the money and just forget about the whole thing. We’ll get rid of the body and pretend nothing ever happened here. Do you understand?”

“Yes, yes,” Old Sa nodded.

“Killing a few gangsters is a piece of cake for us when we escort cargos,” Escort Zheng exclaimed. “These two Sichuan rats behaved so suspiciously, I bet they were either burglars or rapists. They must have come to Fuzhou looking for crimes to commit. Our Young Master saw through their disguises, and took care of them for the safety of the town. He should have gone to the authorities for a reward, but our Young Master does not want to go through all that trouble, and he doesn’t really care for this kind of fame. You, old friend, had better keep your mouth shut. If you let anything out, we will say that you are their accomplice and that you were just using this wine shop as cover to spy for them. From your accent, anyone could tell that you’re not from here. People would say ‘How did those two just happen to show up right after you took over the shop? What a coincidence!’”

“I won’t say a word. I know nothing,” Old Sa said hurriedly in compliance.

Led by Escort Shi, Henchmen Bai and Chen buried the body in the garden behind the shop; they also cleaned up all the bloodstains in front of the door.

"If we don't hear anything unusual in ten days," Escort Zheng said to Old Sa, "you'll get yourself another fifty taels of silver. But if you really feel like telling stories…humph! Well, the Fortune Prestige Escort House has killed hundreds of bandits before. It wouldn't be any trouble to plant two more bodies in your garden, would it?"

"We wouldn't dare! We wouldn't dare! Thanks! Many thanks!" Old Sa complied yet again.

It was already dark outside by the time everything was finally handled. Lin Pingzhi relaxed a little, but still felt uneasiness as he went back to the Escort House. When he entered the front hall, he saw his father sitting in a wooden armchair, his eyes shut, lost in thought.

"Dad!" Lin Pingzhi called.

"Went hunting? Caught any boars?" Lin Zhennan opened his eyes and asked with a smile.

"No," Lin Pingzhi replied.

Lin Zhennan lifted the pipe in his hands and suddenly struck down toward Lin Pingzhi's shoulder. "Take that," he exclaimed.

Lin Pingzhi knew that his father always liked to impulsively check up on his progress in fighting skills. Typically, he would have countered this "Plunging Cosmic Star" – the twenty-sixth move in the "Evil-Resisting Sword Art," with the "Buddha Blossom" – the forty-sixth move. But his mind was so burdened by the incident at the wine shop that he thought his father had already learned about the incident and was bestowing punishment with his pipe. He dared not move, crying out plaintively, "Father!"

Lin Zhennan's pipe halted just about three inches from his son's shoulder.

"What's with you today? You think you'd still have the shoulder when you are actually fighting someone, if you were this clumsy?" Lin Zhennan asked.

Although the words were harsh, a smile played about his mouth.

"Understood!" Lin Pingzhi responded. He dropped his left shoulder and rapidly spun his body around, stepping behind his father. Snatching up a feather duster from the tea table, he thrust it at Lin Zhennan's back. This was the move called the "Buddha Blossom."

"That's the right move!" Lin Zhennan nodded in approval. He passed his pipe across his back and parried the thrust, then countered with a move known as the "Flute-Play on the River."

Lin Pingzhi was much more focused now. He blocked the attack with "Purple Mist East Bound."

Both father and son continued fighting until, after roughly fifty moves, Lin Zhennan swiftly poked his son on the chest just below the right nipple with the handle of his pipe. Not able to fend off the attack in time, Lin Pingzhi felt a sudden soreness in his right arm, and dropped the feather duster immediately.

"Good! Very good! You have shown progress every single day of this month! You lasted four more moves than yesterday!" Lin Zhennan smiled gleefully and sat back down. "Pingzhi, guess what! Our Escort House has received wonderful news today," he announced while filling his pipe with fresh tobacco leaves.

Lin Pingzhi took out a firestone and lit the pipe for his father. "Did you just sign off on a big business deal today?" he inquired.

Lin Zhennan shook his head.

"As long as our Escort House offers good services, business will come to us! Our only concern is our own ability – are we capable of fulfilling big contracts – when they do come to us?"

He inhaled deeply, and then blew out a cloud of smoke.

"Escort Zhang sent us a message from Hunan.[10] Master Yu of the Pine-Wind Temple, the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School, in Western Sichuan, has accepted our gifts."

Hearing the words “Western Sichuan” and “Master Yu,” Lin Pingzhi’s heart almost jumped from his throat. “Accepted our gifts?” he repeated in a mutter.

“I haven’t really told you much about the business of the Escort House,” Lin Zhennan went on. “You wouldn’t have understood anyway. But you are growing up fast, and the heavy burden of running the Escort House will slowly shift onto your shoulders. It’s time for you to start playing a larger part in the business of the Escort House. Son, we’ve been in the escort business for three generations. We have been able to expand to today’s scale and become the largest and most renowned Escort House south of the Yangtze River. How did we accomplish this? First, because of the great fame of your great grandfather; second, because of the fighting techniques our ancestors have handed down, generation after generation. Anyone mentioning the name of ‘Fortune Prestige Escort House’ will give a thumb’s up and say, ‘What fortune! What prestige!’ In the escorting business, reputation counts for twenty percent, real fighting skills count for twenty percent, but the final sixty percent depends on your relationship with both the unorthodox and orthodox members of the Martial World.”

Blowing out another cloud of smoke, he continued.

“Think about it. Our wagons have to pass through ten different provinces. If we had to fight every time we went on a job, how many men would we have lost? Even if we won every single time, it would be like in the old saying: ‘To kill a thousand enemies, sacrifice eight hundred of your own.’ If any of our escorts were injured or killed on the job, the money we earned wouldn’t even be enough to cover the compensation to their families. Soon, we would run out of our own savings as well. That’s why we escorts have to know all the right people and spare no expense to cultivate relationships. Connections are even more powerful than the fist.”

“Yes, Father.” Lin Pingzhi answered. Under normal circumstances, he would have become quite excited and asked many questions upon hearing about the business end of running the Escort House, yet today all he could think of were the words “Western Sichuan” and “Master Yu.” His heart pounded wildly.

“Your father’s Kung Fu is surely not as good as either your grandfather’s, or

your great grandfather's." Lin Zhennan exhaled another cloud of smoke. "But my management skills are definitely better than either of theirs. Your great grandfather founded the business in four provinces: from Fujian to Guangdong in the south, and north to Zhejiang and Jiangsu. I expanded the business to six more provinces: Shandong, Hebei, Hunan, Hubei, Jiangxi and Guangxi. What's the secret here? Let me tell you: make many friends and few enemies. Our Escort House is called 'Fortune Prestige.' Remember, fortune comes before prestige; this means fortune is more important than prestige. Fortune will only come if you keep 'making many friends and few enemies.' If we change it to 'Prestige and Fortune,' wouldn't that mean we would ride roughshod over others for glory? Ha-ha!"

Lin Pingzhi forced a hollow laugh, which was devoid of amusement.

Lin Zhennan didn't notice his son's uneasiness and went on. "The old saying goes, 'Covet Sichuan after capturing Gansu.'[11] But for us, it's 'Covet Sichuan after capturing Hubei.' Our escort route starts from Fujian, goes west through Jiangxi and Hunan, and stops at Hubei. Why shouldn't we continue all the way west, up the river into the province of Sichuan? Sichuan is called the Heavenly Kingdom. There are lots of wealthy people there. If we made it through to Sichuan, we could go either north to Shanxi or south into Yunnan and Guizhou; our business would increase by at least another thirty percent. But Sichuan is a place of crouching tigers and hidden dragons. To do business there, we would have to have connections with the two schools, Qingcheng and Emei.[12] For the past three years, I have been sending valuable gifts to the Pine-Wind Temple of the Qingcheng Sword School and the Golden-Peak Temple of the Emei School every spring and autumn, but neither school would accept our overtures. Priest Radiance, the Head Master of the Emei School, would at least greet the gift bearers, thank them and invite them in for a vegetarian meal, then return the gifts without even breaking the seal. Master Yu of the Pine-Wind Temple is even trickier. His apprentices would stop the gift bearers halfway up the mountain, claiming that Master Yu was in Exclusive Meditation[13] at the moment, and unable to see any guest. They would also claim that they already had everything

they needed in the temple, so that there was no need for any gifts. Our escorts couldn't even tell which direction the gate of the Pine-Wind Temple faced, let alone meet Master Yu. When they came back, they were infuriated. If it weren't because of the specific orders I gave them before the trip to behave with restraint and respect, regardless of how ill-treated they were, they would probably have called them all manner of names and picked several fights."

After these words, Lin Zhennan stood up, a proud smile blossoming on his face. "And guess what? At long last, Master Yu has accepted our gifts, and has even sent four of his apprentices to return the courtesy and thank us in person…."

"Four apprentices? Not two?" Lin Pingzhi asked breathlessly.

"Yes, four apprentices!" Lin Zhennan answered. "Master Yu is really handling this matter quite solemnly. This will make our Escort House look especially good!! I've just sent messengers to our branches in Jiangxi, Hunan and Hubei, informing them of the news and told them to treat these four as our noble guests."

"Father, when people from Sichuan speak, do they usually call others 'son of a turtle'?" Lin Pingzhi suddenly blurted out a question.

"Only bumpkins from Sichuan speak that way. There are rustics everywhere, and of course they are not taught proper manners. Listen to our own henchmen talk when they gamble. They're no better. Why do you ask?" Lin Zhennan chuckled.

"Never mind," Lin Pingzhi replied quickly.

"When the four Qingcheng apprentices come, you should spend some good amount of time with them; watch and learn how students of prestigious schools act. Making friends with them will surely benefit you later on in life."

Both father and son continued chatting some more, but Lin Pingzhi couldn't make up his mind if he should tell his father about the incident at the wine shop, and finally decided that he would tell his mother first. After dinner, the family of three remained in the Back Hall to converse. Lin Zhennan was having a

discussion with his wife as to what gift to get for her brother's birthday in June. It would be tricky to find something appropriate that the Golden-Blade Wang family in Luoyang[14] would hold in high esteem.

Suddenly, uproar came from outside, and moments later, several people rushed into the room.

"Where are your manners?" Lin Zhennan frowned.

Three henchmen had burst in. The man in front muttered in a disturbed tone, "Chief…Chief Master…."

"What's the matter?" Lin Zhennan snapped in annoyance.

"Bai…Bai is dead," Henchman Chen blurted out the words.

Lin Zhennan was slightly astounded. "Who killed him? Gambling must've led to the quarrelling!" He became quite angry, thinking how hard it was to regulate the roughnecks of the Escort House. They would often fight and draw their knives for no reason. And, as the Escort House was headquartered in the capital of the province, it could be rather troublesome if someone was killed on their premise.

"No, it is not like that," Chen explained hastily. "Xiao Li was going to the outhouse just a minute ago and saw Bai lying in the garden nearby. His body was already cold, but there's not a single wound on the body. No one knows how he died. Must've been some kind of a disease."

Lin Zhennan breathed a sigh of relief and relaxed immediately. "Let me go have a look." He started walking toward the garden and Lin Pingzhi followed behind.

When they arrived at the yard, a number of escorts and henchmen had already gathered around the body. Seeing the arrival of the Chief Master, the crowd moved back. Lin Zhennan took a close look at Bai's corpse. Bai's clothes had been unbuttoned, and clearly, there were no bloodstains.

"No wounds at all?" Lin Zhennan asked Escort Zhu, who stood next to him.

“I’ve examined the body carefully, and there’s not a single wound anywhere on the body. It does not look like poison either,” Escort Zhu replied, to which Lin Zhennan acknowledged with a nod.

“Tell Dong the bookkeeper to arrange a funeral for Bai, and don’t forget to send a hundred taels of silver to his family,” Lin Zhennan directed.

The death of a henchman due to illness was not something Lin Zhennan would pay much attention to. “Didn’t Bai go hunting with you today?” he asked Lin Pingzhi after walking back to the living room.

“Yes, he did. He looked fine when we got back. Who’d think he would catch a deadly disease so unexpectedly,” Lin Pingzhi replied.

“Many things in this world are like that,” Lin Zhennan commented. “Whether good or evil, they always happen in an unexpected manner. I’ve always wanted to open the escort trail through the province of Sichuan. I thought it would have taken at least another ten years. Who would have expected that Master Yu would somehow be prompted by some sudden impulse to not only accept my gifts, but to also send four apprentices such a long way to thank us?”

“Father, although the Qingcheng Sword School is well-renowned, our Fortune Prestige Escort House is fairly famous too. We have been sending gifts to Sichuan year after year; it’s only natural for Master Yu to send people our way to show his gratitude as well.”

“What do you know?” Lin Zhennan chuckled. “Qingcheng and Emei have been around for hundreds of years. They’ve had many outstanding disciples in their schools. Maybe they aren’t as famous as Shaolin or Wutang,[15] but they certainly have enough fame to be placed next to Songshan, Taishan, Hengshan, Huashan, and Heng-Shan of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance.[16] Your great grandfather, Sir Yuantu, founded the seventy-two moves of ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art.’ This set of sword techniques shocked the entire Martial Arts Society and gained him great fame. You could say that he never met his match in swordplay. After this sword style was passed on to your grandfather, its eminence declined. It was then passed on to me, and I am afraid that it has

declined even more in my hands. The Lin Family had only one child in each generation for the last three generations. We don't even have any apprentices. With only you and me, we really don't have the same kind of manpower that those other schools have."

"We could gather all the people from our Escort Houses in the ten provinces, and then we could take on any of them – Shaolin, Wutang, Emei, Qingcheng, or the Five Mountains Sword Alliance," Lin Pingzhi declared.

Lin Zhennan was amused. "Son, it's alright to say something like that when you are talking to me. But if you had said those words to an outsider, you'd get into a lot of trouble. The eighty-four escorts we have at our ten Escort Houses, each has his own specialty. Of course, when we all gather together, we aren't afraid of anyone, but what do we gain by beating other people? It is well said that manners and amicability make great fortunes; this is especially true for us in the escort business. What are we going to lose by being humble? Let the others go around showing off."

"Oh no! Escort Zheng is dead too!" somebody suddenly yelled out from outside. Lin Zhennan and Lin Pingzhi were both dumbstruck.

Lin Pingzhi jumped out of his chair and muttered, "They're back for re…!" It took him great effort to finally swallow the word "revenge" back down his throat. Lin Zhennan was already on his way out and didn't catch what Lin Pingzhi had just said.

Henchman Chen rushed in and yelled incoherently, "Chief…Chief Master! Trouble! Escort Zheng…Escort Zheng's spirit is possessed by the Sichuan demon too."

"Stop this nonsense! What Sichuan demon?" Lin Zhennan roared with a stern face.

"Sir! The demon…the man from Sichuan was already very ferocious when he was alive; naturally he would be more terrifying after death…," Chen said lamely. Seeing the Chief Master's hard countenance, he dared not continue, and only looked to Lin Pingzhi with a mixed expression of fear and grief.

“Did you say Escort Zheng was dead? Where’s the body? How did he die?” Lin Zhennan asked impatiently.

Several more escorts and henchmen rushed into the hall. “Brother Zheng died in the stable,” one escort answered with a frown. “He died in exactly the same way as Henchman Bai. There wasn’t a single wound on his body, and no bleeding could be found from any aperture. No swelling on his face either. Maybe…maybe they became haunted by some kind of demon when they… when they went hunting with the Young Master.”

Lin Zhennan snorted. “I’ve lived all my life without ever seeing either a ghost or a demon. Let’s go take a look.” He walked out of the hall and into the stable.

Escort Zheng’s body lay on the ground, his hands still holding onto a saddle. Apparently, he had been taking the saddle off before his sudden demise. There was no sign of any struggle.

As it was already dark outside, Lin Zhennan asked a henchman to hold a lantern while he examined Escort Zheng. He carefully checked all parts of the corpse, including all the major bones, but failed to find any sign of injury – not even a broken finger. Lin Zhennan was not superstitious. When Bai had died suddenly, it was just a strange occurrence. Now, that Escort Zheng died in the exact same way, it had to be more than a coincidence. If they died of plague or some kind of disease, why were there no red or black spots on the bodies? Could the two deaths have been related to something that happened during his son’s hunting trip?

He turned around and asked Lin Pingzhi, “Besides Escort Zheng and Henchman Bai, it was just Escort Shi and him who went hunting with you, right?” He indicated Henchman Chen.

Lin Pingzhi nodded.

“You two come with me,” Lin Zhennan said firmly. Turning to another henchman, he instructed, “Go ask Escort Shi to report to the East Hall immediately. I want to have a word with him.”

Soon, the three arrived at the East Hall. “What really happened?” Lin Zhennan

asked his son. Lin Pingzhi hastily confessed and told his father all about the trouble he had at the wine shop: how they went in for some drinks; how the two men from Sichuan accosted the girl, which resulted in the fight; how the fight broke out and the man attempted to push Lin's head down to kowtow; how he pulled out a dagger and killed that person; and how they buried the body in the back garden and gave old man Sa some silver to keep him quiet. He told everything there was to tell, without leaving anything out.

The more Lin Zhennan heard, the more concerned he became. But still, getting into a fight with an outsider and having it result in his death was not the end of the world. He listened to the whole story from his son without turning a hair. When Lin Pingzhi finished, he pondered in silence for a moment and then asked, "Did these two fellows ever mention which clan or gang they belonged to?"

"Not a word," Lin Pingzhi answered quickly.

"When they spoke or did things, did you notice anything unusual?" Lin Zhennan inquired further.

"I didn't see anything unusual. The fellow Yu…."

"Did you say the man's name was Yu?" Lin Zhennan interrupted.

"Yes. I heard the other guy calling him Brother Yu. But it might have been something else. They had accents, so I couldn't understand them too well."

"It can't be! It can't be a coincidence. Master Yu said he was going to send someone over; how could they have arrived at Fuzhou so quickly? They don't have wings," Lin Zhennan shook his head and muttered to himself.

"Father, you don't think those two were from the Qingcheng Sword School, do you?" Lin Pingzhi's voice quivered.

Lin Zhennan did not answer; instead, he performed a move and asked, "When you attacked him using this move from the Universe Hands, how did he fend it off?"

"He couldn't fend off that move, so I slapped him hard on the face," Lin

Pingzhi replied.

"Good! Very good! Excellent!" Lin Zhennan smiled.

The room had been filled with foreboding, but now that Lin Zhennan showed a smile, Lin Pingzhi felt quite relieved and could not help smiling himself.

"When you hit him with this move, how did he respond?" Lin Zhennan asked again, performing more different moves as he spoke.

"I was infuriated at the time, and can't remember too well. I think I punched him in the chest," Lin Pingzhi replied.

Hearing that, Lin Zhennan became even more relaxed. "Very good! Your move should have hit him that way. If he couldn't even block a simple move like that, he couldn't be a close relative to the famous Master Yu of the Qingcheng Sword School, Pine-Wind Temple."

He kept saying "very good," but he wasn't complementing his son's fighting skills; he was just relieved. There must be many people named Yu in the province of Sichuan; if this particular Yu could not even beat his son, he must have been a terrible fighter. Such a rotten fighter definitely had nothing to do with the Qingcheng Sword School. He kept tapping on the table with his right middle finger as he pondered upon the situation.

"How did he grab hold of your head?" he asked, and Lin Pingzhi demonstrated how he couldn't move when his head was held.

Henchman Chen also felt much encouraged. "Bai was trying to poke him with a hunting fork," he interrupted, "but the fork was knocked out by the guy's back kick and then Bai was also kicked down."

Lin Zhennan felt a shock run through his spine. He asked immediately, "He kicked Bai with a back kick and then kicked the fork out of his hands? How… how did he perform those kicks?"

"It was something like this." Chen grabbed the back of a chair and threw a reverse kick with his right foot, then jumped and threw another back kick with his left foot. These two kicks looked very clumsy, almost like a horse kicking

back its hind legs. Lin Pingzhi watched the two clumsy kicks and could not help laughing. "Dad, see…." But then seeing the fearful expression on his father's face, he stopped abruptly.

"These two kicks seem to be the unique "Shadowless Kick" maneuver of Qingcheng. Son, how did he perform the kicks exactly?" Lin Zhennan inquired.

"My head was held at that moment. I couldn't see how he kicked," Lin Pingzhi said.

"Of course! I'd better ask Escort Shi." Lin Zhennan exited the room and yelled, "Where is Escort Shi? Why isn't he here yet?"

Two henchmen came over and reported that nobody had yet to be able to find Escort Shi. Feeling the uneasiness growing inside him rapidly, Lin Zhennan paced up and down in the garden hall, thinking, "If the two kicks were indeed the "Shadowless Kick" technique, then even if the fellow was not a close relative of Master Yu, he must've had some kind of connection with the Qingcheng Sword School. If that's the case, then who was he?" He finally decided to check it out himself. So he ordered the henchmen, "Go get Escort Cui and Escort Ji."

Escorts Cui and Ji were the careful types, both experienced and prudent, and well trusted by Lin Zhennan. Having heard about the sudden death of Escort Zheng and the disappearance of Escort Shi, they were already waiting outside the hall. As soon as they heard their names called, both walked into the room.

"We need to go check something out," Lin Zhennan explained. "Escort Cui, Escort Ji, my son, and Chen, come with me."

With Lin Pingzhi leading the way, the group of five rode out of town, and headed north. Soon, they arrived at the small wine shop. The door of the shop was shut.

"Old man Sa, old man Sa! Open the door," Lin Pingzhi pounded on the door and called out. He knocked and knocked, but there was no response.

Escort Cui signaled to Lin Zhennan if they should bash down the door. After

getting a nod from Lin Zhennan, he struck the door with both hands. With a resounding crack, the door's bolt snapped, and the swinging doors squeaked back and forth on the rusty hinges.

Escort Cui pulled Lin Pingzhi to the side as soon as he forced the door open. They waited until they were sure that there was no sound coming from within. Lighting a fire, they entered, and then lit an oil lamp sitting on the table along with two lanterns. They searched both the interior and exterior of the shop, yet found no one. However, blankets, trunks, and other everyday accessories were still in the shop.

"The old fellow got scared. There was a murder here and the body was even buried right in the back garden. He was afraid of getting into trouble, so he just ran off," Lin Zhennan said with a nod. Walking into the garden and pointing to a hoe that was leaning against the wall, he commanded, "Chen, dig the body up."

Chen was nearly convinced that the whole crisis had been caused by demons, so after digging only a short while, he felt his limbs getting stiffer and stiffer. He felt so weak that his legs started to give out.

"Utterly useless! How can you even call yourself a henchman?" Escort Ji yelled at him sternly.

He handed his lantern to Chen, took the hoe from him, and then began digging. Not long after, the clothes of the dead body appeared. He dug a little deeper and then levering the hoe beneath the corpse, he gave a strong tug, and lifted the body out of the hole.

Chen turned his head away, afraid to look. But gasps of shock suddenly came from the other four. Scared to death, Chen dropped the lantern. The light was extinguished and the garden was enveloped in complete darkness.

Lin Pingzhi's voice quavered when he muttered uneasily, "We definitely buried the Sichuan guy's body, how come…how come…."

"Light the lantern!" Lin Zhennan ordered. He had been keeping calm since the strange events started, but now there was fear in his voice.

Escort Cui lit the lantern, and Lin Zhennan bent down to check on the body. Minutes later, he declared, “Same kind of death, not a single wound at all.”

Chen finally gathered enough courage to glance at the body, and then he screamed, “Escort Shi! It’s Escort Shi!” The body they had dug out was that of Escort Shi, and the corpse of the man from Sichuan had vanished.

“Something seems strange about this old man Sa,” Lin Zhennan said. He grabbed the lantern and hurried back into the room, looking over everything very carefully. But he couldn’t find anything unusual, even after inspecting everything in the room – in the wine jugs, underneath the stoves, in the iron pot, and under the table and chairs. Escorts Cui and Ji, and Lin Pingzhi also began examining the different rooms.

“Father, come here and look at this,” Lin Pingzhi shouted out suddenly.

Following the sound of his son’s voice, Lin Zhennan found Lin Pingzhi in the girl’s bedroom holding a green handkerchief in his hand.

“Father, how could a poor girl have a handkerchief like this?” Lin Pingzhi asked, his voice quavering with excitement.

Lin Zhennan took the handkerchief from Lin Pingzhi’s hands and examined it carefully. A trace of some kind of light, but sweet, scent soon caught his attention. The handkerchief was very soft and smooth, yet also quite heavy. It was obviously made from high-quality silk. When he looked at it more carefully, he found three levels of green thread sealing the edges of the handkerchief. In one corner, a small red coral branch was embroidered in great detail.

“Where did you find this?” Lin Zhennan asked.

“It fell underneath the corner of the bed. Maybe they didn’t see it when they packed and left in such a hurry,” Lin Pingzhi suggested.

Lin Zhennan put his lantern close to the bed and searched, but found nothing else. He muttered, “You said that the girl was very ugly. I suppose she wasn’t wearing very expensive clothing, but was she dressed very neatly?”

“I didn’t pay much attention. I am sure her dress wasn’t filthy, because I

would have noticed when she poured wine for me," Lin Pingzhi replied eagerly.

"Brother Cui, what do you think?" Lin Zhennan turned to Escort Cui.

"I think this old man and the young girl must be involved with the deaths of Escorts Shi and Zheng, and Henchman Bai. It's even possible that they were the actual killers," Escort Cui concluded.

"The two fellows from Sichuan must have been in on it too; otherwise, why would they move the dead body?" Escort Ji added.

"But that fellow Yu was harassing the girl. I wouldn't have called him names otherwise. They can't be working together," Lin Pingzhi objected.

"Young Master," Escort Cui explained, "you may not realize it, but we are living in a very dangerous world, and people may intentionally set traps into which others may fall. It happens all the time. Two people pretend to fight, and when someone comes to try and separate them, the two will suddenly turn on him."

"Chief Master, what's your opinion on this?" Escort Ji asked.

"The old man and the young girl must have come for us. I am just not sure if those two fellows from Sichuan were in league with them," Lin Zhennan replied.

"Father, didn't you say that Master Yu of Pine-Wind Temple sent four people over. There…there were exactly four people," Lin Pingzhi muttered restlessly.

These words struck Lin Zhennan like a hammer. "The Fortune Prestige Escort House has always shown great respect to the Qingcheng Sword School, and has never done anything to displease them. Why would Master Yu send people to stir up trouble? Why?!" he muttered to himself.

The four just looked at each other in silence; no one could think of anything to say. After a long while, Lin Zhennan finally spoke.

"Let's move Escort Shi's body inside first. When we get back to the Escort House, don't mention this to anyone. We don't want the authorities to know about this and cause any unnecessary trouble. Humph, the Lin family respects

others and wants no trouble, but that doesn't mean we are cowards who won't fight back."

"Chief Master," Escort Ji agreed heartily, "like the old saying goes, 'Keeping an army for a year just for one battle.' All of us will fight for the honor of the Escort House."

"Many thanks!" Lin Zhennan nodded.

The party headed back to town. Just as they were about to reach the Escort House, they saw a big crowd gathered in front of the gate. Countless torches lit the street, turning the night into day. Lin Zhennan's heart missed a beat. He rushed forward.

"Chief Master is back!" several people cried out.

Lin Zhennan dismounted his horse and saw that his wife, Madam Wang, looking extremely angry.

"Look! Humph, someone is trying to challenge us in our home," she exclaimed.

A pair of broken poles lay on the street; each had a flag attached to the end. These were the flags of the Escort House; someone had cut down the two flagpoles and left them lying on the ground. The broken ends were very smooth, apparently cut with a very sharp blade.

Madam Wang was not carrying a weapon, so she drew Lin Zhennan's long sword out from the sheath at his waist. With two sharp tearing sounds, she cut off the two flags from the broken flagpoles. Picking up the flags, she went inside through the gate.

"Escort Cui, cut the stumps of the two flagpoles down," Lin Zhennan instructed. "Humph, it won't be an easy task to take down the Fortune Prestige Escort House!"

"Yes, sir," Escort Cui answered.

"Damn them! What a bunch of cowards they are, only daring to play these dirty tricks when the Chief Master is not at home," Escort Ji cursed.

Lin Zhennan beckoned his son and the two went into the house while Escort Ji poured out even more profanities. Father and son went into the East Hall where Madam Wang had already spread the flags on two tables. On one of the flags, the eyes of the yellow lion had been cut out, leaving two empty holes. On the other flag, the word "Prestige" had been cut out from the name "Fortune Prestige Escort House."

Lin Zhennan was a patient man with an even temper, but even he could not stand these insults any longer. He struck the table with a resounding blow. One leg of the sandalwood table broke with a crack.

"Father, it's…entirely my fault. I got the family into this situation!" Lin Pingzhi trembled.

"Yes, the Lin family has killed someone. So what? If I ever saw a punk like him, I'd kill him too!" Lin Zhennan roared.

"Who got killed?" Madam Wang asked in surprise.

"Pingzhi, tell your mother about it," Lin Zhennan said.

So Lin Pingzhi told Madam Wang everything that had happened: How he killed the man from Sichuan, how they found the body of Escort Shi in the garden of the wine shop, and so forth.

Madam Wang had heard about the mysterious deaths of Henchman Bai and Escort Zheng. At the news of the death of Escort Shi, she exploded.

"Husband, how can we let others push the Fortune Prestige Escort House around like this? Let's gather our people and go seek justice from the Qingcheng Sword School in Sichuan. We can also invite my father and my brothers to join us."

Since her youth, Madam Wang had been known for having a bad temper. As a maiden, she had no qualms about pulling out a knife for even the smallest of disagreements. Her family, the Golden Blade Wang Family, was a large and powerful family in the city of Luoyang. Everyone would defer to her out of respect for her father, the Unbeatable Golden Blade, Wang Yuanba. Even now,

after her son was already a grown man, her hot temper still had not improved much.

"We are still not sure who our enemy is. It might not even be the Qingcheng Sword School. But whoever they are, I doubt they'd stop at two broken flagpoles and two dead escorts…," Lin Zhennan replied when he was suddenly interrupted by the bellowing voice of Madam Wang.

"What else do they want?"

Lin Zhennan cast a sideways glance at Lin Pingzhi and Madam Wang understood instantly. Her heart started pumping fiercely, and her face paled with fear.

"I caused all the trouble. A true man should take full responsibility for his own actions. I won't…won't be afraid." Lin Pingzhi's words were brave enough, but his trembling voice gave him away.

"Humph, they'll have to pass through me first before they can get to you," Madam Wang exclaimed. "The banner of the Fortune Prestige Escort House has been held high for three generations. We've never lost our glory." She turned to Lin Zhennan. "If we can't even settle this little problem, what good are we? How can we look at ourselves in the mirror for the rest of our lives?"

Lin Zhennan nodded to Madam Wang in agreement. "I'll send people to search the town for new faces. Meanwhile, I'll have more people on patrol around the Escort House. You wait here with Pingzhi. Don't let him run around by himself."

"Yes, I understand!" Madam Wang acknowledged.

The couple both understood that Lin Pingzhi would undoubtedly be the next target. The enemy was hidden in the dark while they themselves were exposed under the light. Even if Lin Pingzhi only stepped out of the Escort House for one minute, he would be in grave danger.

Lin Zhennan walked to the Main Hall and gathered the escorts, sending some people to go check out the town, and instructing the rest to patrol the Escort House. All the escorts had heard about the situation. The flagpole of the Escort

House being cut down was a slap in the face for each and every one of them. Infuriated, they had already dressed themselves in uniforms and taken up arms. Upon the command of the Chief Master, they instantly obeyed the order wholeheartedly.

Lin Zhennan felt a measure of relief as he witnessed the entire Escort House working in unison, preparing to defend its honor. Walking back inside, he spoke to Lin Pingzhi.

"Pingzhi, your mom hasn't been well for the last couple of days. The enemy will soon be coming; why don't you move into the room outside her bedroom to guard her?"

"I don't need…," Madam Wang rejected, but before finishing the sentence, she suddenly realized what her husband really meant. He wasn't asking their son to guard her; instead, he was really trying to have their son close by, so they could protect him. Their son was a very sensitive and proud young man. If they had asked him to hide behind them, he would probably feel humiliated, and go straight out to challenge the enemy to a fight. That would be too dangerous! So she immediately swallowed the second half of the sentence down her throat.

"That's right, Pingzhi. Mom is having joint problems these days; both my arms and legs feel weak. Your father needs to take care of the Escort House and can't be accompanying me all the time. If the enemy gets in, I won't be able to fight them off."

"I'll stay with you," Lin Pingzhi stated without hesitation.

That night Lin Pingzhi slept on the bed just outside his parents' room. The couple left the door open. Placing their weapons right next to their pillows, they slept dressed, so that they could jump up to fight at any time.

The night passed uneventfully until dawn, when someone outside the window called in a low voice, "Young Master? Young Master!"

Lin Pingzhi had not been able to sleep for the most of the night, and had just fallen asleep, so he didn't wake up.

“What’s the matter?” Lin Zhennan asked.

“The Young Master’s horse…the horse is dead!” the man outside answered. Lin Pingzhi loved his horse very much, so as soon as the horse’s groom found out about the calamity, he rushed to tell Lin Pingzhi.

Roused by the words, Lin Pingzhi sat up in bed. “Let me go look.”

Lin Zhennan knew that once again, something had gone terribly wrong, so he hurried to the stable with Lin Pingzhi. The body of the horse lay on the ground. It had been dead for quite some time. As before, there was not a single wound on the corpse.

“Did you hear any noise last night?” Lin Zhennan asked.

“No, sir!” the groom answered.

“Don’t get upset. I’ll see to it that you receive another good colt.” Lin Zhennan patted Lin Pingzhi gingerly on the shoulder, as Lin Pingzhi quietly caressed the horse’s corpse, tears emerging from his eyes.

All of a sudden, Henchman Chen burst into the stables shouting in panic, “Chief…Chief Master, it’s terrible…horrible! All those escorts…the escorts were killed by the demon!”

“What did you say?” Lin Zhennan and Lin Pingzhi asked in unison, their voices filled with incredulity.

“Dead, all dead!” Henchman Chen kept muttering uncontrollably.

“Who is dead?” Lin Pingzhi demanded angrily. He grabbed Chen’s collar and shook him hard.

“Young…Young Master…dead!” Chen mumbled dazedly.

Hearing the words “Young Master dead,” Lin Zhennan was most disturbed. But he did not want to yell at Chen for saying those ominous words, afraid of revealing his uneasiness.

“Where’s the Chief Master? We’d better report this to him fast,” a man’s urgent voice floated in from the outside. “The demon is so vicious, what…what can we

do?" another voice asked timidly.

"I am over here! What's going on?" Lin Zhennan shouted loudly towards them, who, in turn, rushed over. It was an escort, followed by three henchmen.

"Chief Master, not a single escort we sent out made it back," the leading escort said.

Lin Zhennan had expected news of someone's death when he heard the commotion. But he had sent out a total of twenty-three escorts and henchmen to gather information last night; how could all of them have been wiped out?

"Well, are you sure they're dead?" he asked hurriedly. "Maybe they're still investigating and just haven't gotten back in time."

The escort shook his head. "We have already found seventeen bodies…."

"Seventeen bodies?" Lin Zhennan and Lin Pingzhi cried out in unison.

Fear written all over his face, the escort confirmed with a nod. "Yes, seventeen bodies. Among them were Escorts Fu, Qian, and Wu. All of the bodies are in the Front Hall at this very moment."

Without saying another word, Lin Zhennan hurried to the Front Hall. All the tables and chairs in the hall had been moved against the walls, and seventeen bodies lay on the floor in no particular order. Although Lin Zhennan was not a novice in handling difficult situations, when he took in the horrible scene in front of him, his hands could not help trembling and his knees almost gave out.

"Why…Why…Why?" he muttered, his voice so dry that the others could barely hear him.

"Alas, Escort Gao was an honest and diligent man; who'd expect that the demon would not spare him, either." Voices came from outside the Front Hall, and seconds later, five neighbors walked into the front hall, carrying a door plank. A dead body lay on top of it.

"When I opened my door this morning, I saw him lying dead in the middle of the street," one of the neighbors explained. "I recognized him as Escort Gao from your Escort House. I figured he probably had some kind of plague, so I

asked a couple of neighbors to help me carry him back to your Escort House."

"Many thanks! Many thanks!" Lin Zhennan cupped his hands[17] and bowed. Turning toward a henchman standing by the side, he instructed, "Give three taels of silver to each of these wonderful neighbors. You can go to the bookkeeper to get the money."

Frightened by all the dead bodies in the hall, the neighbors thanked Lin Zhennan and hurried away, and before long, the bodies of four more escorts were sent back. Lin Zhennan counted the bodies which totaled twenty-two in all. Escort Chu's was the only one not among them, but it might not be long before his body was found somewhere.

Lin Zhennan walked back to the East Hall. Pouring a cup of hot tea for himself, he tried to calm down, but that didn't help. Still feeling completely dumbfounded, he walked out the gate and looked around. The stumps of the two broken flagpoles had been taken away, but he found himself even more disturbed. The foes had killed over twenty people in the Escort House, but had never actually shown themselves; they never formally announced their intentions, nor did they reveal their true identities. He turned around and glared at the big sign bearing the golden words "Fortune Prestige Escort House," thinking, "The Fortune Prestige Escort House has been renowned for decades. Will it come to ruin in my hands?" Then he heard the sound of hoof beats approaching from the street. A horse slowly trotted toward the Escort House, and a man lay slumped back on the saddle. Lin Zhennan walked to the horse, and he wasn't surprised to see that it was Escort Chu. The enemy must have killed him and just left the body on the horse. The horse remembered the way home and came back, all by itself.

Lin Zhennan let out a deep sigh as tears poured down his face and fell on the body of Escort Chu. "Brother Chu," he murmured as he carried the body into the hall, "if I can't avenge you, I'd rather die. Why…why did you leave so hurriedly without even telling us the name of your killer?"

Escort Chu was just a regular escort in the Escort House, and not particularly

close to Lin Zhennan. Lin Zhennan's tears were shed more out of frustration than from the sadness of losing a friend.

Madam Wang stood in front of the hall holding her golden saber in her left hand. Pointing at the courtyard with her right hand, she shouted challengingly.

"You cursed murderers! Why are you hiding yourselves and sneaking around? If you are real men, I dare you to come to the Fortune Prestige Escort House and fight a real fight. Aren't you afraid of being looked down with all of this sneaking around?"

"Did you see anything?" Lin Zhennan asked his wife in a whisper as he placed Escort Chu's body down on the ground.

"No, I didn't see anything," Madam Wang growled. "These rotten lowlifes must be frightened of our Lin Family's seventy-two moves of the Evil-Resisting Sword Art." She waved the saber in the air and continued, "They are frightened of the golden saber in my hand, too!"

Suddenly, a snickering sound rose from a corner of the roof, and then with a hiss of wind, an object zipped through the air and struck the spine of the golden saber. Madam Wang felt a shock run through her arm and she had to let go of the weapon. The saber flew into the air and landed in the middle of the courtyard.

Wasting no time, Lin Zhennan unsheathed his sword and jumped up onto the roof, and with a move called "Cast Upon Demons," the tip of his sword danced like the scatter of falling petals and flew toward the origin of the attack. Having not been able to face his enemies, he found his anger growing over the past couple of days and it now reached the point of explosion. Sparing no strength, he attacked with full force. But the attack hit nothing. The corner of the roof was completely empty; there wasn't even a shadow. He jumped onto the roof of the east room, but found no one there either.

Madam Wang and Lin Pingzhi also jumped up onto the roof with their weapons drawn. Filled with fury, Madam Wang snarled.

"Damn you! You son of a dog! Be a man; come out and fight. Are you scared?

What kind of shameless cowards are you?"

"Where did that son of a dog go? Who was he?" she asked Lin Zhennan.

Lin Zhennan shook his head. "Keep your voice down," he whispered.

The three searched the entire roof and then jumped back down to the courtyard.

"What hit your saber?" Lin Zhennan asked in a low voice.

"Damn that son of a dog! I don't know," Madam Wang snapped.

They searched the courtyard but could find neither darts nor other missiles. The only thing they were able to find were small grains of bricks spread over the floor under the osmanthus tree. Obviously the attacker had hit Madam Wang's saber with just a small piece of brick, and it was quite frightening to imagine that such a small piece of brick could have carried such great power. Seeing the fragments of brick, Madam Wang stopped cursing. Her anger was quenched, and completely replaced with fear. She froze for a moment, and then walked silently into the room.

After her husband and son entered, Madam Wang shut the door behind them. "The enemy is too skillful. We're not in the same class. What…what shall we…?" she whispered nervously.

"We can ask for help from friends. It's perfectly normal for people to help each other in a time of need," Lin Zhennan replied.

"We have many true friends that we can trust, but how many of them can fight better than we can? The ones that are no better than us won't be of any help anyway," Madam Wang questioned.

"Yes, you are right," Lin Zhennan admitted, "but the more people, the more brain power. It might not be a bad idea to ask them for ideas."

"Fine! Who do you think we should ask?" Madam Wang asked.

"Let's get friends who live close by first," Lin Zhennan suggested. "I will transfer all the elite fighters from our Escort Houses in Hangzhou, Nanchang and

Guangzhou here, and also invite famous Kung-Fu masters in our province and the neighboring three provinces."

"Don't you think that would hurt the reputation of the Fortune Prestige Escort House?" Madam Wang frowned.

"Wife, you are thirty-nine years old this year, right?" Lin Zhennan suddenly asked out of the blue.

"Why are you suddenly asking about my age? I was born in the year of the Tiger;[18] don't you remember how old I am?" Madam Wang spat at him.

"I'll be sending out invitations for your fortieth birthday party…," Lin Zhennan said when Madam Wang quickly cut him short grouchily.

"Why the hell are you so interested in seeing me get a year older? You think I'm not old enough already?"

"You're not old at all! You don't even have a single gray hair." Lin Zhennan shook his head. "I am using your fortieth birthday as an excuse, so when we invite relatives and friends over, we won't arouse any suspicion. When everybody arrives, we shall only tell our close friends the true story, then there will be no damage to our reputation," he explained.

Madam Wang thought about it for a while and finally agreed. "Very well! It is your decision. But what do I get for a birthday present?"

"A big one! Let's have a cute, fat, baby boy next year!" Lin Zhennan whispered in her ear.

"Bah, you old goat! Still talking nonsense in such a crisis." Madam Wang's face went scarlet, and she spat at her husband half in annoyance.

Lin Zhennan grinned, and then left for the bookkeeper's office so he could arrange to have the invitations sent out. The joke was just to ease his wife's fear; he, himself, was still deeply worried. "Water a mile away can not put out a fire at hand. Terrible things will most probably happen again in the Escort House this very night. When our friends arrive, there might not be a Fortune Prestige Escort House waiting for them," he thought to himself.

When Lin Zhennan arrived at the door of the bookkeeper's office, he was greeted by two very frightened servants.

"Chief…Chief…Chief Master…something horrible…horrible has happened," one of them mumbled in a trembling voice,

"What's the matter?" Lin Zhennan asked.

"Bookkeeper Mr. Dong just sent Lin Fu to go buy some coffins, and right… right after he turned the corner on East Street, he fell to the ground dead," said the servant fearfully.

"What? Where's the body?"

"Still lying on the street."

"Go bring the body back here," Lin Zhennan directed. "Now, our enemies are becoming more reckless. They even dare to commit murder in broad daylight, and right in the middle of the street," he thought inwardly.

"Yes, sir…yes, sir…!" the two servants answered, but neither of them moved an inch.

"Well?" Lin Zhennan roared.

"Chief Master, you'd better go have…have a look…at…."

Lin Zhennan knew something bizarre must have just happened again. He gave a snort and walked toward the gate. Three escorts and five henchmen were already there. They stared through the gate, all looking very frightened.

"What's going on?" Lin Zhennan demanded, and then saw for himself before anybody had a chance to answer. At about ten paces from the gate, an inch-wide line was drawn on the stone slab street in blood. Words also written in blood next to the line read, "Cross the Line and Die."

"When was this drawn? Did anyone see who did it?" asked Lin Zhennan immediately.

"Earlier, when Lin Fu died on East Street, everybody was crowding around him to see what was happening. There was no one here. I don't know who

would do such a thing," an escort answered.

Lin Zhennan raised his voice and said loudly, "I, Lin Zhennan, am tired of living; I'd like to see how I'm going to die, after I cross this line." He strode out of the gate.

"Chief Master!" Two of the escorts cried out.

Lin Zhennan waved them off and stepped over the line. The blood used to draw the line and the words was still wet. He scuffed the words out with the bottom of his shoes and then went back through the gate.

"This is just an attempt to scare us," he said to the three escorts. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Brothers, would you please first go to the coffin shop, and then make a visit to the Heavenly-Peace Temple in the west end of town to have the monks come over for a mass to calm the souls, deliver them from purgatory, and drive away the evil spirits?"

The three escorts watched the Chief Master stepping over the bloody line with their own eyes. Seeing that no harm had befallen him, they were quite relieved. After getting their weapons, they walked out the gate side by side. Lin Zhennan watched them stepping over the bloody line and rounding the corner of the street. He waited a little bit longer and then went back into the house.

Walking into the bookkeeper's office, Lin Zhennan said to Bookkeeper Huang, "Mr. Huang, will you please write some invitations to some relatives and friends for a wine party in honor of my wife's birthday?"

"Of course, sir! And which day would that be?" Bookkeeper Huang asked.

Suddenly, sounds of running steps came from outside. A man rushed in through the gate. Lin Zhennan stuck his head out and heard a loud thud. Someone had fallen. Hurrying to the place where the sound came from, Lin Zhennan saw Escort Di, one of the three escorts he just sent to the coffin shop, laying on the ground. He was barely alive.

"Brother Di, are you alright?" Lin Zhennan held him in his arms and asked frantically.

“They’re all dead, I…I…I ran back,” Escort Di gasped.

“Who did this to you?”

“Don’t…don’t know…don’t know….” Then after a couple of shudders, Escort Di lay still.

Within minutes, everyone in the Escort House heard the news. Madam Wang and Lin Pingzhi both came out and all they heard from the crowd was: “Cross the Line and Die.”

“I’ll retrieve the bodies of the other two escorts,” Lin Zhennan said with determination.

“Chief…Chief Master…you can’t go,” Bookkeeper Huang muttered. “Great courage brings great rewards. Thirty taels of silver for the one that…that brings the bodies back.” He made the announcement three times, but no one answered.

“Where is Pingzhi? Pingzhi? Pingzhi?” Madam Wang suddenly shrieked frantically, her voice filled with fear.

“Young Master! Young Master!” everyone started calling together with Madam Wang.

“I am here!” Lin Pingzhi’s voice floated in from outside the gate.

With a surge of relieved happiness, everyone rushed to the gate, and rounding the street corner was Lin Pingzhi, with a body draped over each shoulder – he was carrying back the two dead escorts. With weapons in their hands, Lin Zhennan and Madam Wang both rushed over the bloodline to guard Lin Pingzhi’s back.

“What a brave young man the Young Master is! He has great courage!” all the escorts and henchmen cheered, while Lin Zhennan and Madam Wang were both filled with pride for their son.

“Child, that was too reckless. These two escorts were good friends, but they were already dead. It wasn’t worth the risk,” Madam Wang said reprovingly.

Lin Pingzhi managed a smile, but deep inside, he was miserable. “The whole

affair is my fault," he thought to himself. "It is all because I couldn't contain myself and killed that guy; so many people have died because of me. If I only worry about my own life like a coward, how can I bear to ever look at myself again?"

"Unbelievable, Mr. Hua is dead too!" Suddenly shouts came from the back room.

"What happened?" Lin Zhennan shouted as the steward of the Escort House walked out in quick steps.

"Chief Master," the steward said fearfully, "Mr. Hua went out the back door to shop for some vegetables, and he just dropped dead about ten paces out the back door. There are the same…the same words in blood."

Mr. Hua was a cook in the Escort House. His cooking skills were top notch; he was quite famous for his "White-Gourd Pot," "Buddha Over the Wall,"[19] "Pickled Fish," and "Fish-wrap Wonton." He was Lin Zhennan's secret weapon when he wanted to socialize with local officials and rich business owners.

But Hua was just a cook, neither an escort, nor a henchman. It was an unwritten rule that wagon-pullers, sedan-carriers, grooms, and porters were to be left alone when bandits raided escort convoys. With enemies so ruthless, it would probably result in a massacre of the entire Escort House. Lin Zhennan shivered at the thought.

"Don't be afraid." He tried to calm everyone. "Humph, these damn bandits only have the guts to attack when one is off guard. You've all seen the Young Master, Madam Wang, and I step across the line. What did those damn thugs do? Nothing? They dared do nothing."

Everybody agreed obsequiously, yet no one dared to step out of the gate. Lin Zhennan and Madam Wang frowned at each other and neither had any idea what to do.

That night Lin Zhennan scheduled the escorts to guard the Escort House, but when he checked upon them, he found no one on duty. All the escorts just

huddled within the hall. When they saw the Chief Master, all stood up looking embarrassed, yet no one wanted to move. Lin Zhennan knew that the enemy was just too vicious, and after the deaths of so many people, he still had not come up with a solution. No wonder everyone was so scared. So he uttered a few words of comfort, ordered servants to bring wine and dishes to the hall, and then drank together with the escorts. Greatly worried, each one just drank the wine silently, and no one talked much. Not long after, many became drunk and fell asleep.

The following noon, several horses suddenly thundered out of the Escort House. After a short investigation, Lin Zhennan found that five escorts simply could not bear the stress and had fled without notice. He shook his head and sighed.

"When trouble comes, each bird will fly in its own direction. I can no longer take care of each of you, brothers. If you feel like leaving, please go ahead," he declared.

Some escorts started berating the five for lack of loyalty, while some others kept their silence and only sighed. They were probably wishing that they had fled as well.

Near dusk, five horses came back with five bodies. The five escorts, who wanted to escape, only ended up losing their lives before everyone else.

Lin Pingzhi was enraged. Sword in hands, he dashed out of the gate and stood three paces beyond the line of blood, yelling, "A true man should take full responsibility for his own actions. I, Lin Pingzhi, killed Yu from Sichuan. It has nothing to do with anyone else. If you want your revenge, come to me. Stab me through the heart and slice me up! I won't complain. But you keep killing innocent people; what kind of monster does something like that? Lin Pingzhi stands before you. Come and kill me if you dare! If you are too scared to come out, then you are just a pack of craven weaklings; you son of a dog." The sound of his voice escalated, becoming louder and louder. Tearing open his shirt and exposing his body, he pounded his own chest, shouting, "Come out and put your knife right through here! I am a real man and I am not afraid of death!

Why are you so scared to stand in front of me face to face? You damn cowards! You filthy monsters!" His eyes turned red from anger as he struck his own chest heavily.

Many bystanders watched him from far away, but no one wanted to come near the Escort House. Hearing their son shouting, Lin Zhennan and his wife both rushed out of the gate. Their anger and frustration had been steadily building over the last couple of days. The anger finally exploded, and they too began to pour streams of abuse at their unknown enemies.

The escorts looked at each other with admiration for the courage of the three. They felt no surprise that their Chief Master and his wife would shout defiance at their enemies, since the Chief Master was an outstanding man and Madame was a brave woman, but the Young Master looked as fragile as a girl, making him seem that much more heroic for his fearlessness.

The three shouted for a good long while, but were only rewarded with silence.

"'Cross the Line and Die?' I just crossed the line, what are you going to do?" Lin Pingzhi yelled out loud. He walked across the line again and stood straight with pride, sword in hand.

"Yes, yes. These damn thugs only bully the weak but fear the strong. They don't even have the guts to come and face my son," Madam Wang said to Lin Pingzhi tenderly. She grabbed his hand and dragged him back through the gate.

Lin Pingzhi was still trembling with fiery anger. After going back to the bedroom, he could no longer hold back his tears. Bending over the bed, he started to cry.

"Son, you are very brave. You are a true man of the Lin family. There's nothing we can do if the enemy doesn't have the guts to face us openly. Why don't you go take a rest?" Lin Zhennan patted him on the head, trying to comfort him, but Lin Pingzhi continued to cry until he finally dozed off.

After dinner, Lin Pingzhi overheard his parents talking. It was something about some escorts who were talking about digging a tunnel out from the back garden. This way, they could escape without crossing the line of blood. If they

were trapped in the Escort House, all of them would die, sooner or later.

"If they want to dig a tunnel out, let them," Madam Wang sniffed, "but I am afraid…afraid that…Humph!"

Lin Zhennan and Lin Pingzhi both understood what she meant. The escorts would most likely end up just like the five escorts who tried to ride away – losing their lives earlier, rather than later.

"Why don't I go have a look? If it really works, then it might be a good way for all the escorts and henchmen to escape," Lin Zhennan said. He went out, but soon returned, saying, "They were just talking about it, but no one really dared to dig."

That night, the three went to bed very early. Everyone in the Escort House had resigned themselves to their fates, and no one cared to stand guard for the night.

Lin Pingzhi slept till about midnight, when he suddenly felt somebody patting his shoulder. He jumped up and instantly reached for the sword under his pillow. Then he heard his mother's voice.

"Pingzhi, it's me. Your father has been gone for a good while and still hasn't returned. Let's go look for him."

"Where did Dad go?" Lin Pingzhi asked in surprise.

"I don't know!" Madam Wang replied.

The two grabbed their weapons and walked out of the room. They first peeked into the big hall, only to find that it was filled with candlelight and a dozen gambling escorts. Everyone had his heart in his throat for the last couple of days; finally realizing there was really nothing to do to improve the situation, they just stopped worrying about their safety. Madam Wang gestured Lin Pingzhi to follow her, and then left.

Mother and son looked everywhere, but still couldn't find Lin Zhennan. They became more and more worried, but were afraid to alert the household. The news of the Chief Master's disappearance at a time when everyone was scared to death would be disastrous. The situation would be completely out of control.

The two searched all the way to the rear of the Escort House, when Lin Pingzhi suddenly heard a faint noise coming from the armory to the left. Fluttering candlelight shone from behind the window. Walking quietly to the window, he poked a hole in the paper[20] with his fingertip, and looked inside; then he called out happily.

“Dad, there you are!”

Lin Zhennan was hunched over something shielded by his body. When he heard the call, he turned his head back. Lin Pingzhi’s smile froze when he saw the terrified expression on his father’s face. His heart started thumping hard, and he just froze there, mouth wide open.

Madam Wang pushed the door open and went in. There was blood everywhere. Three benches were put together side by side and a body lay across them. The body was completely stripped, and the chest and belly were cut open. Madam Wang looked at the face and recognized it as Escort Huo, one of the five escorts who rode away and then was carried back dead. Lin Pingzhi walked in and closed the door behind him.

Removing the bloody heart from the chest cavity and holding it in his hand, Lin Zhennan exclaimed, “The heart was crushed to pieces. Just as I expected, it was…it was….”

Madam Wang completed the sentence for him, “It was the “Heart Crushing Palm” technique of the Qingcheng Sword School!”

Lin Zhennan nodded and then lowered his head in silence.

By then Lin Pingzhi finally understood that his father was performing an autopsy on the body to try to determine the cause of death.

Lin Zhennan put the heart back into its cavity, wrapped the body with oilskin, and then placed it in a corner. He wiped the blood off his hands with the oilskin and went back to the bedroom with his wife and son.

“The enemy is definitely an elite master hand from the Qingcheng Sword School. Wife, what do you think we should do?” he asked.

“The whole trouble started because of me, I’ll go challenge him to a fight. If I can’t win, then just let him kill me,” Lin Pingzhi bellowed.

Lin Zhennan shook his head. “This person can crush someone’s heart into pieces with a single hit without leaving any sign of damage to the body. His Kung Fu skills are remarkable. He must be a first-class master in the Qingcheng Sword School. If he had wanted to kill you, you’d be dead long ago. I think he is being deliberately cruel. He’s not just simply going to kill us.”

“What does he want?” Lin Pingzhi asked.

“He wants to play with us, like a cat plays with mice. He wants to see us squirm, until we are all frightened to death, and that’s when he will be satisfied,” Lin Zhennan answered.

“Humph, how dare this son of a dog show such disrespect to our Fortune Prestige Escort House,” Lin Pingzhi barked.

“He is surely looking down upon the Fortune Prestige Escort House,” Lin Zhennan stated.

“Perhaps, he is afraid of the seventy-two moves of Father’s Evil-Resisting Sword Art. Otherwise, why does he not dare fight face to face with Father, and only sneaks around, stabbing people in the back?”

“Pingzhi,” Lin Zhennan said as he shook his head slightly. “Your father’s Evil-Resisting Sword Art is well and fine for dealing with regular gangsters. But this man’s Heart Crushing Palm Kung Fu is much better than mine. I…I don’t normally give up so easily, but after seeing Escort Huo’s heart, I…I…well….”

Seeing the dark expression that clouded his father’s face, Lin Pingzhi did not say another word.

“Since the enemy is so powerful, a real man should be ready to swallow his pride, so why don’t we just hide from him for a little while,” Madam Wang suggested.

“That’s what I have in mind, too,” Lin Zhennan nodded.

“Let’s head out to Luoyang tonight,” Madam Wang said. “Fortunately, we

know who the enemy is now. It is never too late for revenge, even if we have to wait for ten years."

"That's right! Father-in-law has friends all over. He will be able to come up with a solution. Let's pack now and we'll leave right away," Lin Zhennan said.

"If we leave, who's going to take care of the people in the Escort House?" Lin Pingzhi asked.

"The enemy has no score to settle with them. After we leave, all the others in the Escort House will actually be safer," Lin Zhennan explained.

Lin Pingzhi thought to himself, "That's very true! The enemy has killed so many people in the Escort House, all because of me. After I leave, the enemy will just leave all the escorts and henchmen alone." So he went back to his room to pack. He looked at all his robes and toys; afraid that the foes might just burn the Escort House to the ground, he could not bear to part with any of them. So even after he had packed two big bags, he still felt that there were too many things left behind. He picked up a jade horse statue on the table with his left hand, and then grabbed a leopard fur with his right hand, a fur that was skinned from a leopard he himself had killed. Carrying all the bags, he strode into his parents' room.

When Madam Wang saw him, she couldn't help grinning.

"We are escaping, not moving. What are you going to do with all this stuff?" she asked amusedly.

Lin Zhennan sighed and shook his head, thinking to himself, "Although we've been a Martial Arts family for generations, our son is so used to living in ease and comfort that except for the Kung Fu he has learned, he is no different from any rich, profligate son. Now, when a sudden misfortune has forced us to run away in a hurry, how can I blame him?" Love and tender affection welled up in his heart, and he could not help but try to comfort his son.

"Grandfather's house has everything you need. Don't bring so much stuff. All we need to bring is enough silver, gold, and valuable jewelry. On our way, we'll be passing by our Escort House branches in Jiangxi, Hunan and Hubei. Do you

think that we have to beg the whole way? The lighter the pack, the better. The less you carry, the easier it is to move about when you fight."

At those words, Lin Pingzhi had no choice but to put down the packages.

"Which way shall we take, dashing out the front gate or sneaking out from the back?" Madam Wang asked.

But Lin Zhennan didn't answer. He sat down in the armchair, closed his eyes and began smoking his pipe. A while later, he opened his eyes.

"Pingzhi, go tell everyone in the Escort House to pack their belongings and get ready to leave by dawn tomorrow morning. Ask the bookkeepers to distribute money to them. After the plague is over, we'll all come back."

"Yes, Father!" Lin Pingzhi answered, feeling a bit surprised that his father had changed his mind all of a sudden.

"Are you asking everybody to just break up in chaos? Who's going to watch the Escort House then?" Madam Wang was also confused.

"There's no need to watch the house anymore. This is a condemned house, haunted by demons. Who would dare come in? After we leave, who do you think would remain?" Lin Zhennan explained.

Lin Pingzhi went out to spread the message. Not long after, the whole Escort House was filled with commotion. Lin Zhennan waited until Lin Pingzhi left, and then spoke again.

"Wife, tomorrow Pingzhi and I will change into henchman's clothes, and you can disguise yourself as a maid. At dawn, over a hundred people will rush out and disperse at the same time; no matter how fierce the enemies are, they only have two or three people at most, and won't know whom to pursue."

"Great idea!" Madam Wang applauded. She went out, and soon came back with two sets of dirty henchman garments, so when Lin Pingzhi came back, he and his father could put them on. She, herself, had changed into a set of dark blue clothes, with a piece of handkerchief decorated with blue flowers covering her hair. Now, except for her extremely white skin color, she looked just like an

ordinary maid. Lin Pingzhi also changed into the henchman clothes. They stank terribly, but he had no other choice.

At dawn, Lin Zhennan had the gate opened and addressed all who had gathered in the court, “This year has not been a good year for us. We’ve suffered plagues and have been haunted by demons in the Escort House. I guess we’ll just have to stay away for a while. All brothers who still want to remain in the escorting business please go to Hangzhou and Nancang to join our Zhejiang and Jiangxi branch Escort Houses. Escort Liu and Escort Yi there will treat you well. Now let us go!”

After these words, all of the over one hundred people present mounted their horses and rushed out the gate. Lin Zhennan locked the gate and, with a howl, ten riders dashed over the bloodline. Everyone was greatly encouraged, and by now, none was as afraid as before; all were thinking the same thought – the earlier they left the Escort House, the safer. So, with the thunder of hoof beats, several rode toward the north gate of the city. Most people did not have any specific plan, so they all followed and headed toward the north gate.

Lin Zhennan signaled his wife and son to stop by the corner of the street. “Let them go north, we shall go south instead,” he whispered.

“Isn’t Luoyang north from here? Why are we going south?” Madam Wang could not understand.

“The enemy probably has guessed where we are heading to, and have set up an ambush outside the north gate. But, if we go south instead, and then make a turn later to go back north, the ambush will not work,” Lin Zhennan explained.

“Father!” Lin Pingzhi suddenly called out.

“What is it, son?” Lin Zhennan asked, but Lin Pingzhi did not say anything more. After a little while he called again, “Father!”

“What do you want to say, just speak out,” Madam Wang encouraged him.

“I still want to go out from the north gate,” Lin Pingzhi declared. “These damn monsters have killed so many of our people, if we don’t fight them to the death,

how can we vent our anger?"

"Of course we will get our revenge. But with your skill level, can you defeat his 'Heart Crushing Palm'?" asked Madam Wang rhetorically.

"So what! At most I'll just get killed like Escort Huo with my heart crushed in pieces!" Lin Pingzhi rebuffed her.

Lin Zhennan's face turned livid with anger. "If all the three generations of our Lin family had acted as recklessly as you, the Fortune Prestige Escort House would have collapsed by itself, saving our enemies the trouble," he bellowed.

Lin Pingzhi did not dare say another word, and just followed his parents quietly. They kept heading south, until they were well out of town, and then turned southwest. After crossing the Min River, they arrived at a small town, Nanyu. They continued the trip for half a day without stopping anywhere. When they finally needed a respite, it was already past noon.

Seeing a small restaurant by the road, they decided to stop and have something to eat. Lin Zhennan told the waiter to bring whatever was available and that the food should be prepared as fast as possible. The waiter took the order and left, but after a long while, there was still no food forthcoming.

"Waiter, hurry up!" Lin Zhennan yelled, wanting to resume their trip as fast as possible. He yelled one more time, but there was still no response.

Madam Wang started calling out as well, "Waiter, waiter…." Still no response.

Jumping up from her seat, Madam Wang drew the golden saber out from her pack. Gripping it tightly in her hand, she ran to the back room, only to find the waiter lying prone on the ground. There was also a woman lying draped over the threshold. Madam Wang put her finger near the waiter's nostrils and found that he was not breathing. She felt the lips of the body. They were still warm.

By then, Lin Zhennan and Lin Pingzhi had already drawn their swords and started checking the surroundings of the small restaurant. The restaurant stood next to a hill all by itself, adjacent to a small forest, with no other shop or neighbor nearby. The trio stood in front of the restaurant and gazed into the

distance in all directions, but there was nothing unusual at all.

Lin Zhennan held his sword in front of him and started shouting in a loud voice.

“Friends of the Qingcheng Sword School, Lin Zhennan is right here awaiting his destiny. Please show yourselves.”

He called out several times, but was only answered by his own echoes, “Show yourselves…show yourselves…!” The trio knew that their enemies were watching close by. This was obviously the spot where they had decided to make their attack. All three of them gasped nervously, but knowing that everything would soon be over, one way or the other, they also felt a sense of relief and were able to regain some sense of calm.

“Lin Pingzhi stands before you! Come and get me! You filthy scoundrels! I know you’re too scared to show yourselves. All you can do is to sneak around, like thieving pickpockets!” Lin Pingzhi yelled.

Suddenly, laughter shot toward them from the woods. Lin Pingzhi only had enough time to take in a glimpse of a blurry shadow, before finding a man standing right in front of him. He did not even bother to take a good look at the man before thrusting his sword toward the man’s chest, using the move called “Attack Straight to the Heart.” The man turned to one side and dodged the attack. Lin Pingzhi changed the thrust to a slash to the side. The man sneered and stepped around to Lin Pingzhi’s left. Lin Pingzhi struck with his left hand and then thrust the sword back.

Lin Zhennan and Madam Wang both had their weapons in hand and were about to jump in to help, but after seeing the well-arranged series of moves Lin Pingzhi had put together, they both stepped back. Lin Pingzhi appeared to be very calm and well organized while fighting such a tough enemy. The man wore a purple robe and had a sword hanging at his waist. He seemed to be about twenty-three or twenty-four years of age, and disdain was written all over his long face.

Lin Pingzhi could no longer keep his anger under control. He chopped and

stabbed and slashed and diced using the "Evil-Resisting Sword Art" recklessly, not worrying about his own safety. The man just moved around, dodging attacks without bothering to draw his own sword or fight back. After Lin Pingzhi had used about twenty different moves or so, the man finally sneered.

"Is this the vaunted 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art'? How mediocre!"

He flicked the sword with his finger, and there was a reverberating ring. Lin Pingzhi felt a sharp pain between his thumb and index finger, and could no longer hold on to his sword. The sword fell to the ground and before he knew it, the man had thrown a sidekick at him, which knocked him down and sent him rolling across the ground. Immediately, Lin Zhennan and Madam Wang rushed over and stood side by side to shield their son behind them.

"What's your name? Are you from the Qingcheng Sword School?" Lin Zhennan demanded.

"With the paltry skills of your Fortune Prestige Escort House, you aren't worthy to know my name. But, since I am here for revenge today, I'll make an exception. You're right, I am from the Qingcheng Sword School," the man said haughtily.

Lin Zhennan pointed his sword to the ground and then cupped his hands in a formal greeting. "I have always held Master Yu of the Pine-Wind Temple in the highest regard," he said. "Every year I've sent escorts to the Qingcheng Sword School with gifts and have never deigned to be impolite in any way. This year, Master Yu has even sent four apprentices to Fuzhou. I wonder how we have offended you."

The man rolled his eyes and sneered. After a long while he finally replied, "You are correct! My Master did send four apprentices to Fuzhou, and I am one of them."

"Excellent! What is your honorable name then?" Lin Zhennan asked again.

The young man seemed disinclined to answer the question, but with a sniff, he stated, "My surname is Yu, I am Yu Renhao."

“‘Ying Xiong Hao Jie, the Four Aces of Qingcheng.’[21] You are one of the four great apprentices of the Pine-Wind Temple,” Lin Zhennan said with a nod, “no wonder your ‘Heart Crushing Palm’ technique is so powerful, capable of killing without drawing blood. Impressive!! Very impressive!! Mr. Yu has come such a long way to visit, and Lin Zhennan did not greet him properly; our lack of manners is unforgivable.”

“The ‘Heart Crushing Palm’ technique…humph…you did not greet us, but that Kung Fu master son of yours sure did. He even killed my Master’s beloved son. Yes, quite a show of manners,” Yu Renhao spoke with dead seriousness.

A cold shiver ran up Lin Zhennan’s spine. He knew that if his son had only killed a normal apprentice of the Qingcheng Sword School, then he could ask a well-respected member of the Martial World to intervene and arrange for a formal apology to the Qingcheng Sword School, which might have solved the problem. But if the victim were really the son of the Pine-Wind Temple Master Yu Canghai, there would no longer be any alternative, except to fight until one side or the other was completely annihilated. He waved his sword and let out a couple of laughs.

“Funny, very funny! Young Hero Yu, you have told a good joke!”

“Who’s joking?” Yu Renhao replied coldly with raised eyebrow.

“I have long admired Master Yu for his amazing Kung Fu skills and his strict discipline with his students,” Lin Zhennan said. “In fact, everyone in the Martial World feels the same way. However, the person my son killed was just a punk who was harassing an innocent girl in a wine shop. Since my son was able to kill him, one can easily tell that his Kung Fu skills must have been very limited. How could such a person possibly be Master Yu’s son? Thus, I conclude that the Young Hero Yu must be joking?”

Presented with this line of logic, Yu Renhao was at a loss for words.

Suddenly another voice came from the woods, “There is an old saying: ‘Two fists cannot parry four hands.’ In that tiny wine shop, your Young Master Lin and twenty-four escorts ambushed my junior apprentice brother Yu…!” The

speaker walked out as he spoke. He had a small head and waved a folding fan casually. He continued, “If it was a fair fight, then there’s not much to talk about. To be frank, even if the Fortune Prestige Escort House had a lot more people, it wouldn’t have made any difference. But your Young Master Lin not only poisoned junior apprentice brother Yu’s wine, but also shot seventeen different kinds of toxic projectiles at him. Humph, this son of a turtle is so treacherous. We came to visit in good will, and never expected to be greeted with an ambush.”

“What is your honorable name?” Lin Zhennan asked coldly.

“No honorable name at all. I am Fang Renzhi,” the man answered.

By then, Lin Pingzhi had picked up his sword and had been standing angrily by the side, waiting for his father to finish the conversation, before jumping in to fight once again. But when he heard all of the nonsense from Fang Renzhi, he couldn’t help but shout angrily, “That is completely false! I had no grievance with him; I’ve never even met him before; I didn’t know that he was from the Qingcheng Sword School; why would I want to harm him?”

“Bull, bull! Stinking lies!” Fang Renzhi shook his head. “If you did not have ill feelings toward my junior apprentice brother Yu, why did you hide some thirty escorts and henchmen outside the little shop then? My junior apprentice brother Yu saw you harassing that innocent girl, so he knocked you down to teach you a lesson. He spared your life, but not only were you ungrateful, you instructed all those damn escorts to attack my junior apprentice brother Yu at once.”

Lin Pingzhi felt as if his lungs were going to explode with rage. “Is everyone from the Qingcheng Sword School a rascal who lies through his teeth?” he snarled.

“The son of a turtle says we’re liars!” Fang Renzhi said with a big grin.

“I said that. So what?” Lin Pingzhi retorted angrily.

“Continue to do so, it doesn’t matter to me.” Fang Renzhi nodded.

Lin Pingzhi was surprised. These words were completely unexpected. Suddenly he heard a "swoosh" and realized that somebody was jumping toward him. He hurriedly struck out with his left palm but was still one step too slow. With the sound of flesh against flesh, he was slapped hard across the right cheek. Sparkles began to swirl in front of his eyes; he almost passed out.

Fang Renzhi retreated back to where he was standing after his lightning quick attack. Putting his hand on his own right cheek, he yelled angrily, "Punk, what did you hit me for? Ouch, it hurts! Ha-ha."

Seeing her son being humiliated, Madam Wang jumped forth and swung her saber at the man. This was a move called "Wild Fire Burning the Sky." Her attack was steady and vicious. The man jumped out of the way and the blade missed his right arm by a mere four inches.

"Damn bitch!" the man cursed, completely shocked. Not daring to take his opponent lightly, he drew his sword and deflected another of Madam Wang's strikes.

"If the Qingcheng Sword School wants to get rid of the Fortune Prestige Escort House, that's easy; but as to who is right and who is wrong, the Martial World will definitely be the judge of that. Young Sir Yu, if you please!" Lin Zhennan saluted Yu with his sword.

Yu Renhao pressed on his sheath, and the sword jumped out of the sheath with a ring of steel. "Chief Master Lin, after you!"

Lin Zhennan thought to himself, "I've long heard that the Pine-Wind Sword Art of the Qingcheng Sword School is both sturdy and light. They say that it is as sturdy as the pine and as light as the wind. I must try to control the initiative for a chance to win." At that thought, he started his attack immediately. After thrusting the sword toward the enemy as a feint, he swiped his sword sideways. This was one move of the "Evil-Resisting Sword Art" called "Keep Away Evil." Seeing the ferocity of the blow, Yu Renhao dodged out of the way. Lin Zhennan did not wait to complete the move; he immediately followed up with another move – "Eye-Picking Zhong Kui,"[22] the point of his sword shot straight toward

his opponent's eyes, and as soon as Yu Renhao jumped back from the tip of the sword, his third attack immediately followed. Yu Renhao raised his sword and blocked the thrust with a clash of metal. Both felt the impact in their arms.

"I thought the Kung Fu of the Qingcheng Sword School was really something," Lin Zhennan thought, "but it seems to be only average. With this level of skill, how could he possibly perform the powerful 'Heart Crushing Palm'? He must have another powerful helper around." With this realization, his heart pumped even faster.

Yu Renhao turned his sword around and stabbed at Lin Zhennan, directing his attack at seven different parts of Lin Zhennan's body almost simultaneously. The thrusts were so fast that it seemed as though the air between them had suddenly been filled with the flickers of silver stars. Lin Zhennan's counter attack was just as fast, working hard to control the initiative. The two fought back and forth, and after over twenty moves, they were still at a standstill.

At the other end, the fight between Madam Wang and Fang Renzhi turned out to be a totally different story. Madam Wang's golden saber was simply no match for the incredible speed of her opponent's attacks; it was already a miracle how she managed several narrow escapes. Seeing his mother on the verge of losing, Lin Pingzhi hurriedly joined in. He swung his sword downward at Fang Renzhi's head. Fang Renzhi moved aside and dodged the attack. Lin Pingzhi lunged forth again like a madman. Suddenly, he tripped on something. Losing his balance completely, he fell flat on his face. "Stay down!" he heard somebody yell, and then he felt a foot pressing down heavily on his back in addition to the sharp prick of a blade. All he could see was the dirt on the ground. He heard his mother screaming, "Don't kill him! Don't kill him!" Then he heard Fang Renzhi yelling, "You lie down, too."

What actually happened was that when Lin Pingzhi and his mother were fighting Fang Renzhi, a third man had sneaked in from behind and swept Lin Pingzhi with his leg, causing him to stumble. He then pulled out a dagger and placed it right at Lin Pingzhi's heart. Madam Wang was already having a hard time defending herself. With this distraction, she started panicking, and her

moves became careless. It became easy for Fang Renzhi to elbow her in the ribs and knock her off her feet.

Fang Renzhi quickly sealed their acupoints.[23] The man who tripped Lin Pingzhi was none other than Jia, who had fought against the two escorts in the small wine shop outside of Fuzhou.

Seeing both his wife and son captured by the enemy, Lin Zhennan also panicked and attacked more desperately. Yu Renhao let out a long laugh and suddenly attacked with several moves that gained him every the initiative in the fight.

"How did this man learn the moves of my 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art'?" Lin Zhennan was astonished.

"How's my 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art'?" Yu Renhao let out a broad grin.

"How…how…did you learn the Evil-Resisting…?" Lin Zhennan could only stutter.

"What's so great about your 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art'? I learned it too," Fang Renzhi started laughing hard. He held his sword and started performing the stances – "Keep Away the Evils," "Eye-Picking Zhong Kui," and "Swallow Flying through the Willow Tree" – all were moves of "Evil-Resisting Sword Art." In that instant, Lin Zhennan was utterly filled with horror. He could never have imagined that his family's very own secret technique, the "Evil-Resisting Sword Art," being performed by his enemies. He was so confused that he completely lost the will to fight.

"Gotcha!" Yu Renhao blurted out as he hit Lin Zhennan's knee. The knee went numb and gave out on Lin Zhennan, forcing him to kneel down. Though he jumped back up immediately, Yu Renhao had already pressed the tip of his sword at Lin's chest.

"Junior apprentice brother Yu, what an excellent display of 'Shooting Star Chasing The Moon'!" Jia Renda cheered loudly. Like the others, "Shooting Star Chasing the Moon" turned out to be yet another move of the "Evil-Resisting

Sword Art."

"You…you know the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art'…okay, just make it quick!" Lin Zhennan heaved a long sigh and dropped his sword. Numbness spread from his back as Fang Renzhi sealed his acupoint with a blow from the pommel of his sword. Then, he heard Fang Renzhi speak again.

"It's not going to end that easy, you swine! You son of a turtle, wife of a turtle, and grandson of a turtle, the three of you are going to have the exquisite privilege of meeting my Master!"

Jia Renda grabbed Lin Pingzhi, lifted him up by the collar, and slapped him hard on both cheeks.

"You little rascal," he snarled, "starting this day, I am going to slap you eighteen times a day, from here all the way to Mount Qingcheng. I am going to slap you till your puny little face is changed beyond recognition!"

Filled with hatred, Lin Pingzhi spat at Jia Renda. Because the two were only a foot from each other, Jia Renda had no chance of dodging, and the wad of saliva hit him right on the nose with a wet smack. Jia Renda was furious. He hurled Lin Pingzhi to the ground and began to kick him on his back.

"Enough, enough!" Fang Renzhi restrained Jia with a big grin. "If you kick him to death, how are we going to explain this to the Master? This scum is as fragile as a girl; he can't handle your punches and kicks."

Jia Renda's Kung Fu was just average, but his character was even worse. His Master was never fond of him, and even his fellow apprentices looked down on him. So, when he heard Fang Renzhi's words, he didn't dare kick Lin Pingzhi again. Instead, he spat at Lin Pingzhi to vent his anger.

Fang and Yu carried the three members of the Lin family into the small restaurant and threw them onto the floor.

"Let's eat something first before we start our trip. Junior apprentice Jia, go cook us something, will you?" Fang Renzhi commanded.

"Sure," Jia Renda answered in compliance.

“Senior apprentice brother Fang, we have to be careful not to let these three escape. The old one’s Kung Fu isn’t half bad; we’ll have to figure something out,” Yu Renhao mused.

“That’s easy!” Fang Renzhi said with a nasty grin. “After we eat, we’ll just cut the nerves and tendons in their wrists and ankles. We can thread these three sons of turtles’ collarbones with a rope and tie them together, just like a string of crabs. I’ll bet you nobody can run away then!”

Lin Pingzhi let loose a torrent of abuse. “If you’ve got guts, kill the three of us right now. Only dirty lowlife scum would do what you are going to do.”

“One more word out of your little rascal’s mouth, and I’ll find some cow dung or dog crap to stuff your mouth with.” Fang Renzhi threatened him with a wolfish grin. These words silenced Lin Pingzhi, although it made him almost pass out with rage. He shut his mouth immediately and did not dare say another word.

“Junior apprentice brother Yu,” Fang Renzhi said. “Our Master taught us the seventy-two moves of the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art,’ and we actually did a good job performing them. As soon as the Chief Master Lin saw those moves, he was scared out of his wits, and his body just gave out on him. Chief Master Lin, I guess you must be wondering at this very moment: How the hell did the Qingcheng Sword School learn the Lin family’s ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’? Am I right?”

At the moment, that was exactly the question Lin Zhennan was pondering in his head: “How the hell did the Qingcheng Sword School learn the Lin family’s ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’?”

Chapter 2: Eavesdropping

Translated by Lanny Lin



The old huqin player walked slowly in front of the short fat man and looked him up and down. “What do you want, old man?” the short fat man demanded in annoyance. “You are talking nonsense!” The old man shook his head and then turned around and walked away. Infuriated, the short fat man stuck his hand out to grab the old man by his scruff.

Lin Pingzhi wanted more than anything to get up and fight Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao to the death, but with several of his acupoints sealed, he was unable

to move any muscle from his lower body. He would become a complete invalid if they were to cut the nerves and tendons of his limbs and thread him through the collarbone, and he would rather die fighting than go through all that pain.

Suddenly, screams sounded from the back kitchen. “Ah…Ah…!” It was a long cry filled with pain, and it was the voice of Jia Renda. Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao both jumped up with their swords drawn and dashed into the kitchen immediately. A shadow flashed by the door, and a person glided in silently, then grabbed Lin Pingzhi by the collar and picked him up. Lin Pingzhi cried out in surprise when he caught a glimpse of the pox-covered face of his rescuer: it belonged to the ugly wine-selling girl, who had caused all this trouble to begin with.

The ugly girl dragged him all the way out the front door. When they reached the big tree where their horses were reined, she grabbed him by the back with her left hand and lifted him up onto the back of the horse. With Lin Pingzhi still in a state of shock, the girl pulled out a sword and swung it swiftly. The blade flashed and the rein was cut free. She prodded the thigh of the horse with her sword; feeling pain, the horse let out an angry neigh, and then pounded madly into the woods.

“Mom! Dad!” Lin Pingzhi shouted. Worrying about his parents and not wanting to run away by himself, he pushed hard against the back of the horse and fell off. After tumbling some distance on the ground, he found himself deep within some tall bushes. Meanwhile, the horse did not stop running and soon disappeared into the woods.

Holding onto a branch, Lin Pingzhi tried to stand up, only to find that his legs had no strength left in them. After raising himself up about a foot, he fell back into the bushes. His waist and backside were tremendously sore. The soreness must have come from bumping into rocks and tree roots after he fell off the horse.

Then he heard the sound of shouting followed by pounding footsteps – someone must have come after him. In a hurry, Lin Pingzhi lay motionless in the bushes. He could hear the loud clashes of weapons nearby. Several people had

started a fierce fight. Quietly, he stuck his head out and watched from the bushes. One group of fighters consisted of Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao of the Qingcheng Sword School. Opposing them were the ugly girl and a man with his face concealed behind a black cloth. Most of his hair was gray, so it was obvious that he was an old man. It didn't take Lin Pingzhi long to conclude that he was the ugly girl's grandfather, old man Sa.

"I thought those two were also from the Qingcheng Sword School," Lin Pingzhi pondered, "but it was actually the girl who rescued me…. Oh! If I had only known that they were both masters of Kung Fu, I wouldn't have risked playing the hero and causing all this trouble for no reason." Then he thought, "Since they are all so busy fighting right this moment, this is the perfect opportunity for me to rescue my father and mother." But the acupoint on his back was still sealed, and his body just wouldn't cooperate.

"Who…who are you? How did you learn the sword skills of the Qingcheng Sword School?" Fang Renzhi cried out in disbelief.

The old man didn't answer. Suddenly, with several blazing flashes, Fang Renzhi's sword flew into the air. Fang Renzhi immediately jumped backward and Yu Renhao rushed forward to block the attacks. The old man kept pressing on with lightning fast moves.

"You…You…!" Yu Renhao shouted, his voice betraying surprise and fear. With a loud ring, his sword also flew into the air.

The ugly girl jumped forth and lunged, but the old man parried her thrust. "Don't kill him!" he commanded.

"But they're so cruel and killed so many people," the ugly girl argued.

"Let's go!" the old man said. Seeing the hesitation on the ugly girl's face, the old man reminded her, "Don't forget our Master's orders."

"Guess I'll let them off this time," the ugly girl nodded reluctantly, and then left through the small grove of trees. The old man followed her, and before long, both of them disappeared into the woods.

It took Fang and Yu a good while to calm down. They both picked up their own swords.

"Unbelievable! How did he know our Qingcheng sword techniques?" Yu Renhao still could not believe it.

"He only knew a few, but…but when he used the move 'Goose in the Sky,' he did really…really…Ah!" Fang Renzhi had to agree.

"They rescued the Lin boy," Yu Renhao said.

"Let's just hope this isn't a trick to lure us away from the Lin Couple!" Fang Renzhi yelled suddenly.

"Damn!" Yu Renhao cried. The two turned around and rushed back to the restaurant.

A short while later, the sounds of horses moving at a slow trot broke the silence as two horses walked into the woods. Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao each led one of them, and Lin Zhennan and Madam Wang were each tied to a horse. Lin Pingzhi almost shouted out, "Mom! Dad!" Fortunately, he was able to swallow down the words. He knew that if he made any kind of noise, not only would he get himself killed, he would also ruin any opportunity he had to rescue his parents. Trailing about twenty feet behind the two horses, a man limped along. It turned out to be Jia Renda. The white cloth wrapped around his head was soaked with blood and he was cursing loudly.

"Hell! You sons of turtles took the rabbit boy, but I've still got these two old rabbits. I'll give each of these two old rabbits a good lashing every day. When we arrive at Mount Qingcheng, we'll see how many lives they have left!"

"Junior apprentice brother Jia!" Fang Renzhi yelled in admonishment. "Master has reminded us over and over to make sure that we capture the Lin couple alive. If any accidents were to befall them, I'd pay to see how many layers of skin Master would peel off you."

Jia Renda snorted, but shut up instantly.

Lin Pingzhi listened as the Qingcheng disciples walked away, escorting his

parents. He was actually slightly relieved after hearing those words.

"They are going to send my parents all the way to Mount Qingcheng, and they won't give them too hard a time on the way. Fujian is far away from Szechwan. I'll have to find a way to rescue Father and Mother."

Then he thought, "When I get to an Escort House branch, I'll send a message to Grandpa in Luoyang right away." He lay silently in the bushes, oblivious to the bites from mosquitoes and other bugs.

Several hours passed. When the sealed acupoints on his back finally opened up, it was already dark. He managed to stand up and slowly walk back to the small restaurant.

"I'd better disguise myself so those two villains won't recognize me, even if they see me face to face. How am I going to rescue my parents if I get myself killed?" he said to himself.

After entering the restaurant owner's room and lighting the oil-lamp, he searched for clothing, but the mountain people were so poor that they did not even own a spare set of clothes in which to change. Feeling very disappointed, he walked out of the restaurant when he spotted the bodies of the owner and his wife lying on the ground. "Well, I guess I'll have to use the clothes of the deceased," he thought. He took the clothes off of the dead body and held them in his hands. They looked filthy and stank badly.

He considered washing the clothing before putting it on, but then decided against it. If he should miss an opportunity to save his parents simply because of his concern over the cleanliness of clothes, he would surely regret it for the rest of his life. He clenched his teeth, undressed himself, then changed into the dead person's clothes.

Lighting a torch, he looked around, and soon discovered his father's sword and his mother's golden saber lying in a corner. He picked up his father's sword and wrapped it in a rag, tied it to his back, and then walked outside. The croaking of the frogs in the canyon sounded in the distance through the otherwise silent night. Lin Pingzhi suddenly felt overwhelmed with desolation

and almost cried out. He threw the torch as hard as he could; the flame formed a beautiful red arc in the night sky before being extinguished in the pond. Instantly, darkness engulfed him once again.

"Lin Pingzhi, Lin Pingzhi! If you can't be cautious and alert, and let yourself fall back into the hands of those Qingcheng villains, then you will be snuffed out, just like that torch falling into that filthy pond," Lin Pingzhi admonished himself.

Raising his arm, he wiped the corners of his eyes with a sleeve. When the sleeve neared his face, the odor reeked so badly that he almost vomited. But he firmly said aloud to himself, "If you can't even withstand this foul odor, you are not a true man!"

He started walking, but before long, his hips began hurting again. He clenched his teeth and increased his pace. However, not knowing which way his parents had been taken, he wandered randomly through different paths in the mountains. He walked till dawn, when rays of sunshine bathed his face, making it difficult to see things clearly.

Suddenly, a thought struck him, "Those two villains are going to Mount Qingcheng. Szechwan Province is to the west of Fujian. Why am I going east?" He hurriedly turned around and began to walk with his back to the sun.

"Mother and Father have been gone for more than a half day," he thought, "and I was walking the opposite direction for half a night; I must be far away from them by now. I'd better buy a horse. I wonder how much money I will need."

He examined his pocket and then groaned. When they started the trip, all the gold and jewelry were put into a leather saddlebag. Lin Zhennan and Madam Wang both had silver on their persons, but not Lin Pingzhi; he did not have even a single tael. He stamped his foot in frustration. "What should I do? What should I do?" He stared blankly at the sky for a while and then decided, "I must go rescue my parents. I am sure I'll find some way somehow, and not starve."

He began walking toward the foot of the mountain. When it was about noon,

his stomach began to growl loudly. Some green fruits on a tree by the side of the road caught his eye. They were not ripe yet, but at least they would assuage his hunger. He went up to the tree to pick some fruits, but then realized that the fruits belonged to someone else. Taking them without permission was really no different from stealing. For three generations, the Lin family had protected goods from being robbed or stolen by bandits. How could he do something that only common thieves do? If somebody saw him, and called him a thief in front of his father, it would have brought great shame to his father! The honor of the Fortune Prestige Escort House would be disgraced forever.

He had learned when he was still a little boy that all infamous criminals started out as small thieves, and that small thieves usually began by stealing only small things, like a squash or fruit. Then they would start to steal more and more, finally losing all self-control, and never able to stop. At that thought, he broke out in a cold sweat.

"One day, Father and I will restore the fame of the Fortune Prestige Escort House! I must always do what a true man does. I would rather beg than steal from others," he vowed.

He continued on his trip in a hurry, and gave no more thought to the fruit trees by the road. A couple of miles later, he arrived at a small village. He walked to a shack and started begging for food in a halting voice. He was used to being waited upon for everything all his life, and had never before needed to beg for anything from other people. After uttering only a couple of words his face had already turned red with shame.

The farmer's wife in the shack had just received a severe beating from her husband and was still in a foul mood. When she saw that Lin Pingzhi was just a mere beggar, she immediately released a torrent of abuse at him.

"You little thief, what are you doing sneaking around! I just lost a hen. You probably stole it, and now you want more? Even if I had some food, I wouldn't give it to a thief like you. You stole my hen, and made my wretch of a husband so angry that he beat me all black and blue!" she yelled, waving a broom.

Every time the woman spat out a curse, Lin Pingzhi stepped back a little. The woman became so excited that she swung her broom at Lin Pingzhi's face. Lin Pingzhi was furious. He moved to the side to dodge the broom, and then shot a strike at the woman with his palm.

A sudden thought popped up into his head, "How shameful, beating up a dumb farmer's wife, just because she doesn't want to give me food?" He tried to catch himself, but since he had used too much strength in the strike, he lost his balance and stumbled. Then, his left foot happened to land on a pile of cow dung. He slipped and fell on his back.

The farmer's wife burst into a loud laugh. "You little thief! You've got just what you deserve!" She smacked him on his head with her broom and spat on him, then turned around and went into the shack.

Lin Pingzhi's anger soared from the humiliation. He got up and found that his hands and face were covered with cow dung. Surprisingly, the farmer's wife came back out with four boiled corncobs and stuck them into his hands.

"Go on, kid, take these! God gave you such a pretty face, even prettier than a girl's, but you don't want to apply yourself. You are just a lazy bum! What good are you?" She said with a laugh.

Still angry, Lin Pingzhi made to hurl the corncobs away, but the farmer's wife grinned, "Very well! Throw them away! Go ahead! Hey, you've got guts and you are not afraid to starve! Great! Throw them away, and I will watch you starve!"

Lin Pingzhi reconsidered, "In order to rescue Father and Mother, and to seek revenge and restore the fame of the Fortune Prestige Escort House, I will have to bear all kinds of humiliation. Starting from today, no matter how hard or humiliating it is, I will just clench my teeth and take it without complaint. To be humiliated by a farmer's wife is really nothing." So he said, "Many thanks!" and then took a big bite of a corncob.

"I knew you wouldn't throw them away," the farmer's wife smiled. She turned and walked away, still mumbling, "This kid is so hungry; it probably wasn't him who stole my hen. Ah, the damn husband, if he only had half of this kid's good

temper, my life would be much better."

Along the way, Lin Pingzhi sometimes begged for food, and sometimes, just ate wild fruits from the bushes. Luckily, this was a good harvest year in Fujian Province, and most families had extra food left over. Although his face was covered with mud, he spoke with good manners, so people liked him, and it wasn't too hard for him to beg for food. He tried to ask for information regarding his parents' whereabouts along the road, but was not able to learn anything. Eight days later, he entered Jiangxi province. He asked for directions to Nancang and went there straightaway. He thought that the Escort House branch in Nancang should have some information. If not, at least he could get some money and a fast horse.

After entering the town of Nancang, he asked someone on the street about the Fortune Prestige Escort House.

"Fortune Prestige Escort House? Why do you ask? It has been burned down to the ground. Even the neighbors' houses were burnt down all together. There's nothing left," the man answered.

Lin Pingzhi groaned inwardly. He came to the street of the Escort House and saw with his own eyes that the entire street was littered with debris. He stood there silently for a long time, his heart aching.

"It must be those gangsters from the Qingcheng Sword School again. If I cannot have my revenge, I would rather die!" he resolved.

Without delaying in Nancang, he immediately went on with his trip westward. Several days later, he arrived at Changsha, the capital of Hunan Province. He had thought that the Qingcheng Sword School might have also burned down this Escort House branch, but when he asked people about news regarding the Fortune Prestige Escort House, no one had heard anything. Lin Pingzhi felt great relief and started heading toward the Escort House in big strides. Soon, he arrived at the gate.

Although the Hunan branch of the Escort House was not as big as the Fuzhou Headquarters Escort House, it too had a huge vermilion gate with two big

majestic stone lions sitting on either side. Lin Pingzhi peeked inside, but did not see anyone.

"I am almost in rags, and look so awkward; the escorts in this branch might scoff at me." He hesitated at the doorway.

He raised his head and then noticed that the sign "Fortune Prestige Escort House Hunan Branch" was upside down. "How could the escorts in this branch be so absentminded as to hang the sign upside down?" he was quite surprised.

Then he turned his head to look at the flags on the flagpoles, and his heart sank. A pair of dirty saddles hung on top of the left flagpole. On the right flagpole was a pair of flower-patterned woman's pants. The pants were torn to shreds, but still fluttered in the wind. While he looked on in shock, a man walked out from the Escort House.

"Hey, you son of a turtle. What are you doing sneaking around here? You trying to steal something?" the man yelled.

Recognizing that the man had the same kind of accent as Fang Renzhi and Jia Renda, Lin Pingzhi knew that he must have come from Szechwan as well, so he did not even look at him and immediately started walking away. Suddenly, he felt a pain in his backside. The man had given him a hard kick. Infuriated, Lin Pingzhi wanted to turn around and fight the man, but he quashed the urge in an instant. With the Escort House obviously occupied by the Qingcheng Sword School, it was a perfect opportunity for him to try and get information about his parents. All he needed to do was to stay calm.

Pretending to be just an ordinary person with no skill in Kung Fu whatsoever, he pretended to take a spill onto the ground, and feigned an inability to get up. The man burst into loud laughter and called him "son of turtles" a few more times before walking back inside.

Lin Pingzhi stood up slowly and ambled into a small alley. He begged for a bowl of cold rice and ate it.

"The enemy is so close by; I'd better not get careless!" He kept reminding himself.

Finding some coal ashes on the ground, he smeared them onto his face until it was completely black, then huddled up in a corner against the alley wall and fell asleep.

Lin Pingzhi waited till about ten at night, then took out his long sword and hung it at his waist. He circled around to the back door of the Escort House and listened carefully. After making sure there was no sound from within the walls, he jumped on top of the wall. Inside was an orchard. He jumped down quietly and started creeping slowly along the perimeter of the wall. Darkness engulfed the orchard. There was neither light nor sound; he could feel the beating of his heart. He had his hand out against the wall as he walked, and was dreading the moment he would step on a rock or dry hay and make a noise that would give him away. After walking through two courtyards, he saw light coming from the East Hall window, so he crept a couple of steps closer, when he heard somebody talking. Slowly moving closer and resting under the window, he held his breath and lowered himself, inch by inch, until he was sitting on the floor, leaning against the wall. Just after he sat down, he heard someone's voice.

"Let's just burn the whole son of a turtle Escort House tomorrow morning, so we don't have to stay here and make fools of ourselves."

"No! We can't!" another voice said. "Senior apprentice brother Pi and others just burnt down the entire Escort House Nancang branch, and I heard that dozens of neighbors' houses were burnt down as well. Something like that won't be good for the reputation of our chivalrous Qingcheng Sword School. That incident will most likely get them punished by Master."

Lin Pingzhi was outraged. Now, there was no doubt that the Qingcheng Sword School was behind these despicable acts. He cursed their hypocrisy for having the gall to still call themselves chivalrous.

"Well then, we really shouldn't burn the house down. But are we going to just leave the house intact?" the previous voice asked.

The other one laughed. "Junior apprentice brother Ji, think about it. We've already hung the sign of the Escort House upside down and also raised a pair of

women's pants on top of their flagpole. The name of Fortune Prestige Escort House has already been totally trashed. We should leave the pants hanging there for as long as possible. Why bother burning down the house?"

"You're right, senior apprentice brother Shen!" Ji laughed. "Ha-ha, the pair of pants is going to bring the Escort House so much bad luck, they won't be able to regain their reputation for at least another three hundred years."

The two laughed for some time, then Ji said, "We're going to the town of Hengshan tomorrow for Liu Zhengfeng's ceremony; what present shall we bring? The news of the ceremony came so unexpectedly. If the present isn't valuable enough, it won't look very good for our Qingcheng Sword School."

"I've got the present ready," Shen said in good humor, "and relax; I guarantee you that we won't lose face for the Qingcheng Sword School. The present might even get us a lot of attention at the banquet for the Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony."

"What is the present? Why don't I know about it?" Ji asked delightedly.

Shen was quite content and let out a chuckle. "We are just liberating it, so we can make a gift of it. No need to take anything out of our own pockets. Look, is this good enough?"

The sound of someone opening a package came through the window.

"Amazing!" Ji burst out in a cry of surprise. "Senior brother Shen, do you have magic powers? Where the hell did you get such expensive items?" Ji asked in awe.

Lin Pingzhi was really tempted to look inside through the crack of the window to see what kind of present it was, but he maintained his discipline, realizing that if he were to stick his head up, a shadow could fall on the window; it would be all over if he let the enemy find him. So, he suppressed his curiosity. Then he heard Shen's voice, again.

"Did you think that we occupied the Fortune Prestige Escort House for nothing? I was going to present this pair of jade horses to Master, but right now,

it is probably better to let old Liu Zhengfeng be the lucky recipient."

A tide of anger washed over Lin Pingzhi. "So they robbed the treasure from our Escort House and used it for their own advantage. What a bunch of burglars! What treasure would the Hunan Escort House Branch have? It was probably a client's goods, waiting to be escorted. The pair of jade horses must be extremely valuable. If we can't get them back, Father would have to be the one to compensate."

Shen laughed again. "There are four bags here, one for all of Master's wives,[24] one for all the apprentices, one for you, and one for me! Go ahead, pick one."

"What are these?" Ji asked. After a short while, he burst out with another exclamation of surprise, "Wow, these are all gold and jewels! We are damn rich now!!! What a son of a turtle the Escort House is! The hell with them! They really have extorted a lot of money! Senior apprentice brother, how did you find these? I searched all over the Escort House over a dozen times, and I was just about to dig up the grounds. All I found was about a hundred taels of silver. How did you find all this treasure without breaking a sweat?"

Shen sounded very pleased with himself. "Do you think they just put their gold and treasure anywhere? For the last couple of days, I watched you open drawers, smash boxes, take down walls, and have a good time searching. I knew that you'd be busy over nothing. But you would not have believed me, even if I had told you. Anyway, all that searching wouldn't hurt you, big boy."

"Excellent, excellent! Senior apprentice brother Shen, where did you find these?"

"Think about it, there is one thing in this Escort House that was out of place. What was it?"

"Out of place? Lots of things are out of place in this son of a turtle Escort House. For one, their Kung Fu skills were so damn poor, but they hung a picture of a vicious looking lion on their flagpole," Ji scoffed.

“We replaced the big lion with a pair of woman’s pants. Now it is appropriate.” Shen laughed. “Think again! Are there any other strange things in this Escort House?”

“These Hunan asses have too many odd habits. For example, Escort Zhang is the chief of the entire branch Escort House, but he put a coffin in the room next to his own bedroom. What bad luck! Ha-ha!” Ji slapped his leg.

“Use your head!” Shen chuckled. “Why would he put a coffin in the next room? Could it be the body of his wife or son that he really hates to part with? I think not! I figured he hid something important in the coffin. The coffin was just used to….”

“Aha!!” Ji jumped up in realization. “That’s it! That’s it! These treasures were hidden in the coffin! Cool! Damn! These sons of turtles Escorts are just too sneaky. Senior brother Shen, these two bags are of the same size. How can I take the same amount as you? You should take a greater share.” Then there came the sounds of gold and jade, tumbling against each other; apparently, Ji took some jewels out from one bag and put them into another.

There was no sound from Shen declining the offer.

“Senior apprentice brother Shen, I’ll go get some water. Let’s wash our feet and then get some rest,” Ji suggested. He yawned, and then pushed the door open and walked out.

Lin Pingzhi shrank his body under the window, not daring to move a muscle. He peeked from the side of his eyes and caught the glimpse of a short and fat man. It was the one who had kicked him earlier in the day.

A little while later, Ji returned with a basin of hot water.

“Senior apprentice brother Shen, this time, Master sent dozens of apprentices out. I’d say that the two of us have achieved the most. Thanks to you, even I will look good this time. Senior apprentice brother Jiang and other apprentices went to strike the Guangzhou branch, and senior brother Ma and some other apprentices went to strike the Hangzhou branch; they are so careless, even if they see a coffin, they wouldn’t figure out that there could be treasure inside.”

“Senior apprentice brother Fang, junior apprentice brother Yu, and Jia Renda got the Fuzhou Headquarters. They must have found more than we did. But since Master’s precious son got killed in Fuzhou, they’re going to end up with more blame than credit,” Shen said cheerfully.

“Master, himself, organized the attacks against the Fortune Prestige Escort House headquarters; senior apprentice brother Fang and junior apprentice brother Yu were just scouts,” Ji said, “Master won’t blame senior apprentice brother Fang and junior apprentice brother Yu for the death of junior apprentice brother Yu. This time we are striking out in full strength. All the apprentices started the attacks against the headquarters and the branches of the Escort House at the same time. But no one expected that the skills of the Lin family were nowhere near their reputation; just three scouts alone were enough to capture Lin Zhennan and his wife. Even Master didn’t see that coming. Ha-ha!”

Lin Pingzhi felt cold sweat dripping down his forehead. It was clear that the Qingcheng Sword School had been plotting the attacks for a long time, and attacked all the Escort Houses simultaneously. The trouble didn’t start because he had killed that man named Yu; even if he hadn’t killed that rascal Yu, they would have attacked the Escort Houses all the same. Even Yu Canghai, himself, came to Fuzhou; it was no wonder then, that there was an attacker with the skill necessary to perform the “Heart Crushing Palm.” But how did the Escort House offend the Qingcheng Sword School? Why did they attack so viciously? By now, he realized he no longer needed to blame himself for causing all the trouble and his rage was ready to explode. If it weren’t for the fact that his Kung Fu skills were no match for his enemies, he’d have broken through the window and chopped the two animals inside into little bits! Then he heard splashing from inside. The two had begun washing their feet.

“Master didn’t have the wrong impression,” Shen continued. “Years ago, when the Fortune Prestige Escort House shocked the southeast region of the Martial World, they seemed to have some real skills. The ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’ earned them a great reputation; they couldn’t have done it by trickery. I’d say the descendants probably weren’t smart enough to learn the real skills from their

ancestors."

Lin Pingzhi's face turned red with shame.

"Before we came down Mount Qingcheng," Shen went on, "Master taught us the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art.' Although we couldn't learn the complete set of techniques very well in only a couple of months, I think this set of sword moves has a lot of potential; it's just hard to release the power. Junior apprentice brother Ji, how much did you figure out?"

"I heard from Master that even Lin Zhennan himself, could not grasp much of the true idea behind the set of sword moves," Ji replied, "so I didn't really study it that hard. Senior apprentice brother Shen, Master gave the order for all apprentices to meet at Hengshan; this means that senior apprentice brother Fang and the others will bring the Lin couple to Hengshan, right? I wonder what kind of character the descendent of the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art' is."

Hearing the shocking news that his parents were still alive, and would be brought to Hengshan, Lin Pingzhi felt both joy and sorrow at the same time.

"In just a few short days, you will meet him," Shen said, "then you can practice the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art' with him, ha-ha."

Suddenly the window opened. Lin Pingzhi was astounded and thought that they had discovered him. Just when he was about to run away, he was doused with hot water from the basin being poured out of the window. He almost cried out in astonishment because of the soaking. The light in the room was soon put out, and darkness fell over the courtyard.

Lin Pingzhi was still in shock. He could feel water dripping down from his face, and it had a foul odor, he then realized that fellow Ji must have poured the filthy water, in which they just washed their feet, on him. Although Ji didn't do this intentionally, it was still quite humiliating. But at least, he had learned some information regarding his parents; so no matter what, even if he had to be soaked in urine, it would have been worth it.

The night was now silent. Afraid that the two might hear him if he left right away, he decided to wait till they fell asleep. He leaned against the wall and

stayed motionless under the window. After quite a while, the sound of snores arose from inside, and he stood up slowly.

Lin Pingzhi glanced back and suddenly saw a long quivering shadow cast on the window. Startled, he squatted down instinctively. Then he discovered that it was the window shutter wobbling slightly in the night wind, and realized that Ji didn't bolt the window after dumping out the water.

"Now is the perfect time for revenge!" he told himself.

He pulled out his long sword with his right hand, then gently lifted the shutter with his left hand, climbed into the room, and then slowly closed the window. Moonlight shone through the paper on the window; he could see the two men asleep, one on each bed, by one side of the room. The one with a bald head was facing the wall. The other with a wild bush of a beard was lying on his back. Five bags and two swords sat on the table in front of the beds.

Lin Pingzhi raised his sword. "One slash each, just as easy as that!" he thought to himself. But when he was about to swing his sword at the fellow who had his face up, another thought came to him. "If I kill these two in such an underhanded way, I would simply be a sneaky murderer. If, later, I can master the family Kung Fu skills, and then challenge these Qingcheng villains, face to face, that would be a hero's way of doing it!"

He moved the five bags to the table by the window, pushed the window open gently, and then stepped out. He slid his sword back into its sheath by his waist and took all the bags out through the window. After tying three of the bags to his back and grabbing the other two with his hands, he walked slowly toward the back courtyard, afraid to make any noise that might wake up the two. He opened the back door and quietly walked out of the Escort House. After orientating himself with his surroundings he headed directly toward the south town gate. The gate was still closed because it was nighttime, so he hid by a small hummock and tried to get some rest. His heart beat very rapidly, since he still feared that the two Qingcheng apprentices might find out what had happened and come after him before he could get away.

At dawn the next morning, when the gate opened, he went out immediately, and spared no strength running down the road. After running for four or five miles, he finally felt he was out of danger and calmed down. Ever since leaving Fuzhou, this was the first time he truly felt relaxed. Seeing a small noodle restaurant by the road, he went in and ordered a bowl of noodles. He did not dare to stay long, so after finishing up the bowl, he immediately reached into the bag for money and took a small lump of silver out to pay for the meal. The restaurant owner gathered all the copper coins in the small restaurant and still could not find enough change. Lin Pingzhi simply waved his hand and said loudly, “Keep the change! Don’t worry about it!”

After so many days of ill treatment, humiliation, and being looked down upon during his travels, Lin Pingzhi finally reclaimed his rich Young Master attitude.

After another ten miles, Lin Pingzhi arrived at a large town. He booked a first-class inn room and then opened the five bags after bolting the door and the windows shut. The first four bags contained all manner of gold, silver, jade, and jewelry. The fifth bag, a bit smaller, contained a beautiful brocade box, and inside the box, there was a pair of five-inch tall jade horses.

“With just one branch of the Escort House, we’ve already accumulated so much treasure, no wonder even the Qingcheng Sword School has cast greedy eyes on the Escort Houses,” he thought aloud.

He took out some small lumps of silver and put them in his pocket, and then combined all the rest into a big package he could carry on his back. He then went to the market and bought two fast horses. For the next couple of days, he rode the two horses in turns and only slept four or five hours each night. Thus, by spending as much time as possible traveling, he soon arrived at the town of Hengshan.

As soon as he entered the town, he noticed many denizens of the Martial World, going about the streets. Concerned about the possibility of bumping into Fang Renzhi or other Qingcheng Sword School members, he ducked his head and straightaway went to look for an inn. But after checking several inns, he found that none of them had any vacancy.

“It’s going to be Master Liu’s Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony three days from now; that’s why our inn is already full of guests. Try your luck at another inn,” a porter suggested.

With no other choice, Lin Pingzhi tried his luck in some remote streets, and after asking at three different inns, he finally found a small room. He figured, “Although I have covered my face with ashes, Fang Renzhi is pretty sharp, and he might still be able to see through my disguise.” So he bought three pieces of sticking plaster at the local pharmacy and stuck the plaster to his face. He stretched his eyebrow downward and pulled the left corner of his mouth up until it was turned over and revealed half of his teeth. When he looked at himself in the mirror, Lin Pingzhi saw an ugly man of miserable appearance; even he himself could not stand it. He then strapped the big bag containing all the treasure against his back and then dressed over it. Bowing down a little, he was transformed into a hunchback with a big hump.

“I look so dreadful, even Mom and Dad wouldn’t recognize me now. No more worries,” he thought.

After eating a big bowl of noodles with pork chops, he decided to just wander around, hoping to accidentally bump into his parents, or simply hear something about the Qingcheng Sword School. Any information at all would be useful. He wandered for about half a day, until small raindrops suddenly began to fall from the sky. He bought a big bamboo fiber hat on the street and hurriedly put it on. Dark, heavy clouds were gathering close to the horizon, and it seemed that the rain wasn’t going to stop anytime soon. He turned into a street and saw a teashop full of people, so he went in and sat down. The waiter brought out a teapot, a small plate of pumpkin seeds, and a small plate of broad beans.

Lin Pingzhi drank a cup of tea and started chewing the seeds to kill time, when he heard somebody say, “Hey hunchback! Mind if we share your table?” The man did not wait for Lin Pingzhi to answer and just sat down. Two others sat down, as well.

At first, Lin Pingzhi didn’t realize that the man was talking to him. After a slight hesitation he finally remembered that he was the “hunchback” they had

referred to, so he replied with a smile, “Sure, sure, be my guest!” All three were dressed in black and all had weapons by their waists.

The three men were intent upon their drinking and conversation, and didn’t even give Lin Pingzhi a second glance.

“Master Liu’s Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony is really going to be a big party. It’s still three days until the ceremony, and guests have already filled the whole town,” a young one said.

“Of course!” a one-eyed man concurred. “The Hengshan Sword School has already got a great reputation by itself, not to mention that it is a member of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, which is even more famous. Who wouldn’t want to be on their good side? Besides, Liu Zhengfeng, Master Liu, is excellent in Kung Fu. His expertise is in the thirty-six moves of Wind-twirling Geese-falling Sword, and he is considered the second best in the Hengshan Sword School, only slightly lower in skill than the Head Master of the Hengshan Sword School – Great Mr. Mo. Lots of people have wanted to make his acquaintance, but he never had birthday parties, or weddings for his children, or any kind of events, so there were no good excuses to meet him. No wonder all kinds of people from the Martial World are gathering here once they heard about the happy Gold Basin Hand Washing event. I’d say tomorrow and the day after, it’s going to be even more crowed in the town of Hengshan.”

“Not everyone is coming here just to make friends with Liu Zhengfeng,” another man with a graybeard said sardonically. “The three of us are not coming for that, are we? Liu Zhengfeng is doing his Gold Basin Hand Washing; that means after the ceremony, he will never use his Kung Fu again, and will no longer care about justices and injustices in the Martial World. There won’t be a Master Liu in the Martial World, anymore. Since he will vow to never use his sword again, what’s the use of the thirty-six moves of the Wind-twirling Geese-falling Sword? After the Hand Washing, a Kung Fu master would be just like any average person, and all his skills will be wasted. What’s the point of making friends with him, then?”

“Well,” the young one argued, “although Master Liu won’t be using his Kung

Fu skills anymore, he is still the second most powerful person in the Hengshan Sword School. By making friends with Master Liu, one can also make friends with the Hengshan Sword School, which in turn means you can make friends with the Five Mountains Sword Alliance!"

"To make friends with the Five Mountains Sword Alliance? Are you worthy of that?" The graybeard sneered.

"Brother Peng, don't talk like that," the one-eyed man said. "We live in the Martial World, the more friends the better, the less enemies the luckier. The Five Mountains Sword Alliance does have great skills, yet they still show respect to all the friends in the Martial World. If they had acted arrogantly, and looked down upon everyone else, then why are there so many guests in Hengshan Town?"

The graybeard snorted and fell silent. After a long while, he spoke again, "Probably because people curry favor with the powerful. Just looking at them makes me angry."

Lin Pingzhi wished the three would keep talking, so perhaps they might say something about the Qingcheng Sword School. But since they did not agree with each other, each just drank his tea and said nothing. Then, he heard someone behind him speak with a low voice.

"Uncle Wang, I heard that Master Liu is only about fifty years old, just about the prime age for his Kung Fu skills. Why did he suddenly decide to quit the Martial World? Isn't that a waste?"

An old voice answered, "People in the Martial World have all kinds of reasons to wash their hands. For example, someone can be a big gangster of the heterodox persuasion, who had committed many crimes, but after washing his hands, he won't be killing people or burning houses any longer. So, by doing this, he can firstly leave a better reputation for his descendants; and secondly, if serious crimes were committed in his neighborhood, he would not be a suspect. But Master Liu is very wealthy and his family has been rich for many generations, so of course what I just said would not apply to him."

“Of course! It has nothing to do with him,” another man agreed.

Uncle Wang continued, “One that studies martial arts deals with combat all his life. It is very possible that at some point, he will hurt or kill somebody and make enemies. As he gets old, knowing that all these enemies are still out there in the Martial World could really weigh him down with worry. Now when Master Liu invited so many guests and informed the entire world that he won’t be using Kung Fu anymore, what he is really saying is that his enemies won’t have to worry about his taking revenge, and that he, himself, hopes that his enemies won’t come and give him trouble, either.”

“Uncle Wang, don’t you think he is really putting himself at a disadvantage?” the young man asked.

“Why a disadvantage?” Uncle Wang didn’t understand the question.

“Master Liu won’t be going around giving trouble to other people,” the young man explained, “but other people can come and give trouble to him at anytime. If someone wants to kill him, and Master Liu can’t use his Kung Fu skills, then is he just going to let them kill him without even defending himself?”

“You young lads really don’t know much!” Uncle Wang grinned. “If somebody wants to kill you, of course you are going to defend yourself. With the kind of fame the Hengshan Sword School has and the great skills Master Liu possesses, one should pray to Buddha that Master Liu doesn’t give him any trouble. Who would be so stupid as to give trouble to him? Do they have the heart of a lion or the guts of a panther? Even if Master Liu decides to not fight them himself, he has many apprentices; which of them would be easy to overcome? You are really worrying for nothing!”

“There is always someone stronger than the strong. Who dares to claim that he can defeat all comers?” the graybeard that sat opposite to Lin Pingzhi murmured to himself. But he spoke with a very low voice and neither of the two behind him heard his words.

“Like those escorts,” Uncle Wang went on, “if they had made a fortune, and then decided to retire at the height of their career, close their business early,

wash their hands and stop earning risky money, that would have been a smart thing to do."

These words struck Lin Pingzhi like a thunder. "If Father had retired a couple of years ago and washed his hands, what would life be like today?" he couldn't help asking himself.

"Clay jars always break by the well; generals always die in battles. Onlookers always see better than the players; to really quit at the height of one's career is far easier said than done," the graybeard murmured again.

"Absolutely!" the one-eyed man couldn't agree more. "For the last couple of days, I've heard many people say: 'Master Liu's fame is like the sun at high noon, and he resolutely retired at the height of his career. How admirable!'"

A middle-aged man, dressed in silk robes, sitting by the table on the left, broke into their conversation. "I was in the town of Wuhan a couple of days ago. I heard from some friends in the Martial World that Master Liu had to wash his hands and renounce the Martial World because of troubles that would be better left unmentioned."

"What did they say? Why don't you tell us about it?" the one-eyed man turned around and asked.

"The story would be fine in Wuhan. But here in Hengshan, I'd better not speak so freely," the man smiled.

"Many people have already heard the rumor, so why do you bother pretending it's such a secret?" a short fat man said in a deep grumpy voice. "Everybody is saying that Master Liu has to wash his hands, because he is too skilled in Kung Fu and that he is too popular among friends."

He spoke with a loud voice, and instantly, all interested eyes turned to him.

"Why does someone have to quit the Martial World because of his skills and popularity? Why is that?" several people asked at the same time.

"People who don't know the inside story will be confused, of course, but once you learn the secrets, you won't think it strange at all," the short fat man said

contentedly.

"What inside story?" somebody asked.

The short fat man just smiled, but did not answer.

"Why bother asking him? He doesn't know the story, either. He's just blowing a lot of hot air," a thin man several tables away retorted haughtily.

"Of course I know it," the short fat man declared loudly, unable to ignore the barb. "Master Liu is washing his hands, because he takes the situation as a whole into consideration – so there won't be internal conflict within the Hengshan Sword School."

Once again, several people clamored for an explanation, all at once.

"How is he taking the situation as a whole?"

"What internal conflicts?"

"Do they have problems between fellow apprentices?"

The short fat man began his explanation. "Outsiders all consider Master Liu the second best fighter in the Hengshan Sword School, but everybody in the Hengshan Sword School knows that Master Liu's skill in the thirty-six moves of the Wind-twirling Geese-falling Sword is far greater than the Head Master of Hengshan Sword School – Great Mr. Mo. Great Mr. Mo can pierce three wild geese with one thrust, but Master Liu can get five. All of the apprentices under Master Liu are better than those apprentices under Great Mr. Mo. The situation has become more and more tense. In a couple of years, Great Mr. Mo's fame most likely will be eclipsed by that of Master Liu. I heard that the two factions have already fought a couple of times in secret. Master Liu has a large, wealthy family. He doesn't want to compete with his senior apprentice brother for fame. That's why he wants to wash his hands so he can just retire quietly to a life of peace and luxury."

"Most admirable!" many people declared, nodding. "Master Liu knows what's important and what's not. People like that are rare."

"Then Great Mr. Mo is really making a great mistake. Isn't he weakening the

power of his own Hengshan Sword School by forcing Master Liu to renounce the Martial World?" someone else asked.

"How can one man figure everything out? All I want is to be the Head Master of the Sword School without challenge. Who the hell cares if the power is more or less?" the middle-aged man in silk sneered in imitation of Great Mr. Mo.

The short fat man took a couple of sips of tea and began banging the lid of the teapot loudly. "More tea, more tea!" he shouted. Then he said, "See, this is really a big event for the Hengshan Sword School. There are guests from every kind of school and clan, but the Hengshan Sword School itself…."

Before he could finish his sentence, someone near the door struck some chords on a huqin,[25] and someone began to sing, "The poor Yang Family, showed great loyalty, protected…the Song Government…." The words were drawn out and sounded quite melancholic. Everybody turned around to look, and saw an old, tall, thin man sitting next to a table. His face looked haggard, and he was dressed in a long blue robe. The robe had been washed so many times that some parts looked more white than blue, making him look quite decrepit. He was obviously some kind of a begging performer.

"Shut your devilish voice," the short fat man yelled at him. "Don't you know that you just cut me off?"

The old man stopped playing his huqin so loudly, but continued humming, "At the Golden Sand Beach…double dragons met…lost the battle…."

"Hey, buddy, you were just talking about all the schools and clans having sent people, so what about the Hengshan Sword School, itself?" someone asked.

"The apprentices of Master Liu are greeting guests all over Hengshan town, but other than Master Liu's apprentices, have you seen any other apprentices from Hengshan Sword School?" the short fat man continued.

The people in the crowd just looked at each other and their speculation turned into an indistinct buzz.

"That's right! How come we didn't see any? But isn't that a bit disrespectful to

Master Liu?”

The short fat man grinned at the man in the silk robe. “That’s why I think you are just plain chicken; afraid to talk about the internal conflict in the Hengshan Sword School. What are you worried about? No one from the Hengshan Sword School is going to be here, so how are they going to hear about this?”

The sound of the huqin once again got louder and the tune changed. The old man began to sing again, “The young lad caused great trouble….”

“Stop annoying people,” a young man yelled at him. “Here’s some money!” He flicked his hand, and a bundle of copper coins flew over and landed right in front of the old man. The aim was very accurate. The old man thanked him and put the coins in his pocket.

“Hey, brother, you are a projectile expert! That throw was most excellent!” the short fat man exclaimed in praise.

“It was nothing.” The young man smiled. “So brother, according to what you are saying, Great Mr. Mo is not showing up!”

“How could he show up? The relationship between Great Mr. Mo and Master Liu is like that of water and fire. They’d start a fight the minute they saw each other. Master Liu has already given ground. Great Mr. Mo should be satisfied,” the short fat man said.

The old huqin player stood up suddenly, and walked slowly in front of the short fat man. He looked him up and down.

“What do you want, old man?” the short fat man demanded in annoyance.

“You are talking nonsense!” The old man shook his head then turned around and walked away.

Infuriated, the short fat man stuck his hand out to grab the old man by his scruff. Without warning, a light flashed in front of his eyes and the blade of a long thin sword flew toward the table. The sharp ring of the blade echoed. The short fat man was so astonished that he jumped back instinctively, afraid of being hurt by the sword. Then he saw the old man slowly insert the sword into

the bottom of the huqin till the entire sword disappeared into the instrument. No one would have expected a sword to be hidden in an old huqin.

"You are talking nonsense!" the old man shook his head again, then slowly walked out of the teashop. Everyone watched him disappear into the rain, and all there was left was the sad music from the huqin, drifting aimlessly in the distance.

"Look, look at the table!" someone uttered in a cry of surprise. Everyone looked in the direction his finger was pointing. There were seven teacups on the table where the short fat man had sat; a ring, about half an inch wide, had been neatly sliced from each cup. The seven china rings had fallen by the cups, yet none of the cups even moved an inch.

People in the teashop gathered around and everyone started talking about the cups.

"Who is he? What incredible sword skills!" one person exclaimed.

"One slice gets all seven cups and none of the cups moved at all, it's almost like magic!" another one praised.

"Luckily the old gentleman showed mercy upon you," someone said to the short fat man, "otherwise your head and neck would have been just like these cups."

"Nah! That old gentleman must be a famous master; he would never have lowered himself to behave so commonly!" another one commented.

The short fat man just stared at the seven half-cups blankly. His face was completely white and he did not hear a word said by the crowd.

"See, I told you not to talk so much," the middle-aged man in the silk robe said. "Trouble comes from unnecessary words; worry comes from acting without thinking. Right now there are all kinds of hidden dragons and crouching tigers in Hengshan, and many of them are elite fighters! That old gentleman must be a good friend of Great Mr. Mo. He heard your disrespectful words about Great Mr. Mo, so of course, he decided to teach you a lesson."

“He wasn’t a good friend of Great Mr. Mo,” The graybeard said coldly. “That was the Head Master of Hengshan Sword School, ‘Night Rain of Xiaoxiang,’ Great Mr. Mo, himself.”

“What? He…he was Great Mr. Mo? How do you know?” Everyone was shocked and asked the question simultaneously.

“It’s quite elementary,” the graybeard said. “Great Mr. Mo loves to play the huqin and especially the song ‘Night Rain of Xiaoxiang.’ It could move the listeners to tears. The words ‘sword hidden in the huqin, sword plays the music’ are an apt description of his Kung Fu skills. Since all of you are in Hengshan town, how could you not have heard of that? That brother said earlier that Master Liu could pierce five wild geese with one thrust, but that Great Mr. Mo could only get three, so he sliced seven cups to demonstrate his abilities. If even cups can be sliced into pieces, how hard do you think it would be to get wild geese? No wonder he said that you were talking nonsense.”

The short fat man was still in shock. He lowered his head, speechless. The man in the silk robe paid the bill and dragged him out of the teashop.

The people in the teashop had watched the magic thrust from “Night Rain of Xiaoxiang” Great Mr. Mo, and suddenly they all felt a chill settle in their hearts. Since none had dissented while the short fat man was defaming Great Mr. Mo, they were worried that they might have planted seeds of trouble, so they all paid their bills and left hurriedly. In a short while, the once crowded teashop became almost empty. Other than Lin Pingzhi, there were only two other guests, bent over a table, dozing off.

Lin Pingzhi gazed at the seven half-cups and the seven china rings on the table and sank deep in thought. The old man had been so wretched looking, that it seemed someone could have pushed him over with a single finger, yet with a mere wave of his sword, all seven cups had been sliced in half. If Lin hadn’t left Fuzhou, he would have never known that there could be people with such outstanding skills in the world. He was like a frog, watching the sky from inside a well back at the Fortune Prestige Escort House. At that time, he thought that the highest level of Kung Fu people could achieve would be, at most, on par

with that of his father. If he were to become a student of this old man and work hard on his Kung Fu training, he might actually have a chance to avenge the Escort House; otherwise, there was really no hope.

Lin Pingzhi mulled over the idea a bit longer. Why couldn't he go and find this Great Mr. Mo and implore him to rescue his parents and take him as an apprentice? He stood up in excitement, but a seed of doubt sprouted within his thoughts. After all, Mo was the Head Master of the Hengshan Sword School, and the Five Mountain Sword Alliance had a good relationship with the Qingcheng Sword School; why would he offend his allies for a total stranger? At this discouraging thought, he sat back down feeling utterly depressed.

Just then, a melodious and tender voice rose, "Second apprentice brother, it looks like the rain just won't stop. I'm almost soaked through. Why don't we stop here for some hot tea?"

Lin Pingzhi was stunned. He recognized the voice the instant he heard it. It was none other than the voice of the ugly wine-selling girl who had saved his life. He lowered his head in a hurry.

"Alright, let's drink some hot tea to warm up a little," a much older sounding voice answered.

The two walked into the teashop and sat at a table, diagonally across from Lin Pingzhi. Lin Pingzhi glanced out of the corner of his eyes and saw the wine-selling girl in a green dress seated with her back to him. The person sitting besides her was the old man who claimed to be her grandfather.

"So you two are really fellow apprentices disguised as grandfather and granddaughter to carry out some scheme in Fuzhou," he thought. But why did they save him? Maybe they would know of his parents' whereabouts.

The waiter cleaned the table and brought out some hot tea. The old man saw the seven half-cups on the table beside them and could not help but utter a cry of surprise.

"Little Apprentice Sister, look!"

“Amazing! Who could have cut these seven cups?” the young girl was also quite surprised.

“Little Apprentice Sister, let me pose a riddle: One thrust seven directions, powerful enough to cut gold and jade. Who do you think cut these seven cups?” the old man asked the girl in a low voice.

“I wasn’t here when it happened; how should I know who…?” the girl started to protest, when suddenly, she started clapping her hands in glee. “I’ve got it! I’ve got it! It’s one of the thirty-six moves of ‘Wind-twirling Geese-falling Sword,’ the seventeenth move ‘One Thrust Drops Nine Geese.’ This must be the work of Liu Zhengfeng, Master Liu,” she proclaimed triumphantly.

“I am afraid that Master Liu’s skills have not progressed to that level yet; you’ve only got it half right,” the old man shook his head with a smile.

“Hold on! Don’t say it!” The girl pointed at him with a big grin. “I know who it was. It…it…it was ‘Night Rain of Xiaoxiang’ Great Mr. Mo!”

All of a sudden, the sounds of applause and laughter came from seven or eight different directions. “Good job, Little Apprentice Sister!” Several people shouted.

Lin Pingzhi was startled. “Where did all these people come from?” He glanced up from the corner of his eyes again and saw that the two dozing men had stood up, and there were five others who just walked out from the teashop’s back room. One was dressed like a porter; one held an abacus in his hands, and looked like a merchant; another had a small monkey perched on his shoulder and looked like a street performer.

“Ha, so you dirty tricksters were all hiding. You almost gave me a heart attack! Where’s Big Apprentice Brother?” the young girl grinned.

“We’ve just met, and you’re already calling us dirty tricksters?” the man with the monkey said with mock seriousness.

“Well, you hid yourselves and tried to scare me, didn’t you? So of course you’re dirty tricksters,” the girl retorted with a grin. “Why isn’t Big Apprentice

Brother with you?”

“How come you don’t ask about anything else but your Big Apprentice Brother?” The man with the monkey laughed teasingly. “We’ve barely spoken two sentences and you’ve already asked about your Big Apprentice Brother twice. Why don’t you ask about your sixth apprentice brother?”

The girl stamped her foot on the floor. “Bah! You’re standing here in perfect shape, safe and sound Monkey-boy. Why should I bother asking about you?”

“Well, Big Apprentice Brother is also safe and sound. Why are you asking about him then?” the man with the monkey shot back with a grin.

“I am not talking to you any more,” the girl exclaimed. “Fourth apprentice brother, you’re the only gentleman of the bunch! Where’s Big Apprentice Brother?”

Before the man dressed as porter could answer, several others began to protest. “Ho! Only your fourth apprentice brother is a gentleman, and we are all villains? Hey, Number Four, don’t answer her.”

“Don’t answer then!” the girl exploded in a huff. “If you don’t want to tell me, fine! But don’t expect me to tell you one word about the strange and interesting things that happened on our way here when I was with second apprentice brother.”

The man dressed as porter did not participate in any of the joking and bantering. He seemed to be a simple and straightforward person.

“We departed with Big Apprentice Brother yesterday at Hengyang,” he said. “He told us to come first. By now he is probably already sober, and will be here soon.”

“He got drunk again?” the girl frowned slightly.

“Yep,” the man dressed as a porter answered.

“This time he really drank his fill,” the man with the abacus cut in. “He drank from morning till noon, and then from noon till dusk. He probably drank at least twenty to thirty liters of good wine!”

“That’s not good for his health! Why didn’t you talk to him?” the girl admonished.

The man with the abacus stuck his tongue out and made a face. “If Big Apprentice Brother would listen to other people’s advice, then the sun would have risen from the west. But I guess if Little Apprentice Sister tried to stop him, then he might drink one liter less.” Everyone laughed at these words.

“Why did he start drinking like that? Was he celebrating something?” the girl asked.

“You’ll have to ask him about that,” the man with the abacus replied. “I think he figured he would see his Little Apprentice Sister when he came to Hengshan town and felt really happy about it, so he decided to celebrate.”

“Nonsense!” the girl sniffed, yet she sounded quite pleased.

Lin Pingzhi listened to the joking among these fellow apprentices. “It seems this girl really likes her Big Apprentice Brother very much,” he thought. “But if that second apprentice brother is already so old, the Big Apprentice Brother must be even older. The girl is only sixteen or seventeen, how could she fall in love with someone so old?” He thought a bit longer and then found an answer. “Ah, yes. The girl has pox-marks all over her face. She is way too ugly. No one else would take her, so she has to love an old drunkard.”

Then he heard the girl asking again, “So Big Apprentice Brother started drinking since yesterday morning?”

“I guess if we don’t tell you the whole story, you just won’t leave us alone,” the man with the monkey conceded. “Yesterday morning the eight of us were just about to start the trip when Big Apprentice Brother suddenly detected the scent of some great wine from the street. We checked it out, and found a beggar drinking out of a wine calabash. That really piqued Big Apprentice Brother’s sense of wine, so he went over to talk to the beggar, praising his wine, and asking what kind it was. The beggar replied that it was monkey wine, and Big Apprentice Brother asked what monkey wine was. The beggar then answered that monkeys in western Hunan Province knew how to use fruits to make wine.

The fruits those monkeys used were the freshest and sweetest, so the wine made from them was the best as well. The beggar had walked into the monkeys' domain by accident, and the monkeys happened to be away, so he stole three calabashes of wine and also caught a small monkey. See, this is him." He pointed to the monkey on his shoulder. One of the monkey's legs was tied to his wrist by a line. The monkey kept rubbing its head, scratching its cheeks, and making faces; it looked very comical.

The girl looked at the monkey and burst into laughter. "Sixth apprentice brother, no wonder your nickname is Monkey-Six. You and your little friend here look just like twins."

"We are not twins," Monkey-Six said with a straight face. "We are fellow apprentices. This little fellow is my Big Apprentice Brother, and I am his junior." Everyone burst into loud laughter.

The girl laughed as well. "Aha, you are making fun of Big Apprentice Brother. Wait till I tell him about this. He'll be sure to kick your backside."

"How did your brother end up in your hands?" she asked again after giggling for awhile.

"My brother?" Monkey-Six was lost for a moment. "Are you talking about this little critter? Well, that's a long story. It's going to give me a headache!"

"You don't have to tell me, I can guess," the girl said archly. "Big Apprentice Brother must have asked for the monkey, and asked you to take care of it, hoping the little thing would make a calabash of wine for him!"

"Hey, that's right!" Monkey-Six said.

"Big Apprentice Brother always likes to come up with these hare-brained schemes," the girl said. "The monkeys only make wine when they're in the mountains. Now that he's caught, why would he collect fruits to make wine? If you let him go loose to find fruits, wouldn't he just run away?" After a short pause she continued, "Otherwise, how come our Monkey-Six hasn't made any wine?"

“Little Apprentice Sister, you’re being impudent to your senior apprentice brother,” Monkey-Six said with mock sternness.

“Aha, now you’re flaunting your seniority.” The girl grinned. “Hey, sixth apprentice brother, you still haven’t touched on the real topic. Why did Big Apprentice Brother start drinking all the way from morning to evening?”

“Right,” Monkey-Six said. “Big Apprentice Brother didn’t pay any mind to how dirty the beggar was and pleaded for some wine from him. The beggar was so dirty that he must have had a crust of filth on him at least three inches thick; lice were crawling in and out of his filthy clothes; tears and mucus covered his face. Maybe there was some drool in the calabash as well….”

“Stop it! That’s gross!” the girl covered her mouth and frowned.

“You think it was gross, but not Big Apprentice Brother!” Monkey-Six exclaimed. “The beggar said that only a half calabash of wine was left out of the three. He was not going to give it away to anyone. Big Apprentice Brother took out a tael of silver and offered one tael of silver in exchange for one mouthful of wine.”

The girl was annoyed and amused at the same time. “What a lush!” she spat.

“The beggar finally agreed,” Monkey-Six went on. “He took the money and said, ‘One mouthful! No more!’ Big Apprentice Brother replied, ‘I said one mouthful, so of course only one mouthful!’ He lifted the calabash and started drinking. Who’d expect his mouthful to last so long that he was able to finish the entire half-calabash of wine in just one breath. It turned out that he used the Qi-Gong[26] Master had taught him to drink the entire calabash of wine like a black dragon sipping water from the sea, without ever taking a breath.”

When everyone heard this, they all burst into laughter.

Monkey-Six continued, “Little Apprentice Sister, if you were in Hengyang and witnessed Big Apprentice Brother’s drinking Kung Fu, you’d have nothing but admiration for him!! ‘Spirit concentrates in the Diaphragm, breaths flow around the Forbidden Region, soul floats in the air and rises above the mountains,

energy shoots up to the stars.' His Qi-Gong technique almost reached the pinnacle of perfection and was extremely subtle."

The girl laughed so hard that she almost fell down. "You big magpie," she scolded, "describing Big Apprentice Brother in such a mean way. Huh! And you'd better be careful, making fun of our Qi-Gong formulas and scripts!"

"I am not making things up." Monkey-Six laughed. "Every one of these six fellow apprentices saw it. Didn't Big Apprentice Brother drink using Qi-Gong?"

"Little Apprentice Sister, it was true!" Other apprentices by the side chimed in, nodding.

"This Qi-Gong technique was so difficult that he was the only one who was allowed to learn it. And all he could use it for was to cheat wine from a beggar," the girl sighed in despair. Yet beneath the condemnation, there was an undercurrent of praise.

Monkey-Six continued with his story. "Big Apprentice Brother drank until the bottom of the calabash pointed to the sky; the beggar of course didn't like it. He seized Big Apprentice Brother's robe and kept yelling that he had agreed to only one mouthful, and how come Big Apprentice Brother had drunk all his wine? Big Apprentice Brother smiled and replied, 'I truly only drank one mouthful. Did you see me take another breath? Without changing breaths, it only counts as one mouthful. We did not specify if it should be a big mouthful or a small mouthful. Actually, I only drank half a mouthful, not the full mouthful. One tael of silver was for one mouthful, half a mouthful should only be worth half a tael of silver. You owe me half a tael of silver!'"

"He drank someone's wine and still wanted to skip out on the bill?" the girl couldn't help laughing.

"The beggar almost cried," Monkey-Six said. "Big Apprentice Brother then said, 'Hey, brother, don't be so upset, I bet you must be quite a wine connoisseur! Come on! Let's drink our fill, my treat!' Then he dragged the beggar into a wine house by the side of the street. Then a bowl for you, a bowl for me, and the two just drank on and on. We waited till noon, and the two were

still drinking. Big Apprentice Brother then asked for the monkey and gave it to me to take care of. By afternoon, the beggar was already lying on the floor, drunk, and unable to get up. Big Apprentice Brother was still drinking by himself but not able to straighten his tongue. He told us to come to Hengshan first, and he would be right behind us."

"That's why he was drinking," The girl was satisfied. She paused for a while and then asked, "Was the beggar a member of the Beggars Clan?"

"Nope. He didn't know any Kung Fu and he wasn't carrying any bags either,"[27] the man dressed as a porter said, shaking his head.

The girl gazed at the rain outside for a while. Seeing that there was no sign of it stopping, she murmured, "If you had come together with the others, then you wouldn't have to make your trip in the rain today."

"Little Apprentice Sister, you said that you and second apprentice brother saw lots of strange things on your way here; aren't you going to tell us about them?" Monkey-Six asked.

"What's the hurry?" the girl asked. "Let's wait till we see Big Apprentice Brother and then I'll tell the story, so I don't need to tell it twice. Where did you agree to meet?"

"We didn't arrange anything," Monkey-Six replied. "The town of Hengshan isn't that big; we'll bump into each other eventually. Come on, you tricked me into telling the story about Big Apprentice Brother drinking the monkey wine, and now you don't want to tell us your story?"

The girl's attention seemed to have drifted away. "Second apprentice brother, will you please tell the story to the other apprentice brothers?" She glanced over at Lin Pingzhi's back and said, "There are all kinds of people here. Let's find an inn first and then tell the story at our leisure."

"All the inns in Hengshan town, big and small, are already full," said a tall fellow, who didn't say much before. "Since we don't want to disturb the Liu House, when we meet Big Apprentice Brother later, let's go to the temple outside

town and rest there. Second apprentice brother, what do you think?"

Since their senior apprentice brother had not yet arrived, it was natural that the old man was looked to as the leader among the apprentices. "Agreed. Until then, we'll wait here for Big Apprentice Brother," he nodded.

Monkey-Six however, was eager to hear their story. "That hunchback is probably a retard. He has been sitting there for so long without moving a bit. Why should you worry about him? Second apprentice brother, when you went to Fuzhou with Little Apprentice Sister, what information were you able to gather? The Fortune Prestige Escort House was wiped out by the Qingcheng Sword School, so does the Lin family have any true skills?" he prompted them in a low voice.

Hearing the name of the Escort House mentioned Lin Pingzhi listened even more intently.

"Little Apprentice Sister and I met Master in Changsha," the old man answered. "Master told us to come to the town of Hengshan to meet Big Apprentice Brother and the rest of you. Let's not rush to the story about Fuzhou yet. Why did Great Mr. Mo use the move 'One Thrust Nine Geese here?' You all saw what happened, didn't you?"

"Yeah," Monkey-Six immediately rushed to tell how people were talking about the Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony of Liu Zhengfeng and how Great Mr. Mo showed up unexpectedly, and scared everybody off.

The old man nodded. After a long pause, he said, "A lot of people in the Martial World are saying that Great Mr. Mo is not getting along with Master Liu. Now that Master Liu is about to have the Hand Washing ceremony, I really don't understand why Great Mr. Mo is acting in such an odd manner and not showing himself in public."

"Second apprentice brother, I heard that the Head Master of the Taishan Sword School, Priest Tian-Men himself, came, and has already arrived at the Liu House," the man with the abacus said.

"Priest Tian-Men came in person?" the old man said in surprise. "Master Liu is

really going to look good now. Since Priest Tian-Men is staying at the Liu House, if a fight really breaks out between Liu and Mo, the two apprentice brothers of Hengshan Sword School, Great Mr. Mo won't have such an easy job of it with such an elite fighter as backup for Master Liu."

"Second apprentice brother, whom will Master Yu from the Qingcheng Sword School help then?" the girl asked.

Hearing the words "Master Yu from Qingcheng Sword School," Lin Pingzhi felt as if somebody had just punched him in the stomach.

Monkey-Six and the others all started talking at once.

"Master Yu is here too?"

"It is not easy to get him off Mount Qingcheng."

"There's going to be a big crowd in Hengshan now. So many master level elite fighters! I am afraid that there might be some big fights."

"Little Apprentice Sister, who told you that Master Yu came too?"

"Why do I have to be told? I saw him with my own eyes," the girl stated.

"You saw Master Yu? In Hengshan?" Monkey-Six asked.

"Not only in Hengshan town, but also in Fujian province and Jiangxi province," the girl said.

"Why did Master Yu go to Fujian, Little Apprentice Sister? But I guess you probably wouldn't know, would you?" the man with the abacus said.

"Fifth apprentice brother," the girl replied, "you don't have to prod me. I was going to tell you, but since you want to provoke me, I won't say a thing!"

"This story is only about the Qingcheng Sword School. There's no harm if others overhear it. Second apprentice brother, what was Master Yu doing in Fujian? How did you see him?" Monkey-Six couldn't stay his curiosity.

"Since Big Apprentice Brother hasn't come yet," the old man said, "and the rain won't be stopping soon, there's not much to do anyway. Let me tell you the story from the beginning. Once you understand the cause and effect, when you

meet someone from the Qingcheng Sword School later, at least you will be ready. Last December, when Big Apprentice Brother beat up Hou Renying and Hong Renxiong…."

"Ha-ha!" Monkey-Six suddenly burst out laughing.

"What's so funny?" the girl glared at him.

Still laughing hard, Monkey-Six answered, "I am laughing at those two arrogant fellows, naming themselves Renying and Renxiong.[28] They're even known by the nickname 'Ying Xiong Hao Jie, the Four Aces of Qingcheng' in the Martial World. See, my name is just plain 'Lu Dayou,' and with such a plain name, trouble will never come looking for me."

"That's not true!" the girl exclaimed. "If your last name wasn't 'Lu,'[29] and you weren't the sixth among the apprentices, why would you have a nickname like Monkey-Six?"

"Sure, sure." Lu Dayou smiled. "Starting from this day forth, I will change my name to…."

"Don't interrupt second apprentice brother from telling the story," another apprentice cut him off.

"Alright, alright, I won't!" Lu Dayou said, but still could not help laughing.

"What are you laughing at now? You're just a nuisance!" the girl frowned.

Lu Dayou grinned. "I was just remembering how Hou Renying and Hong Renxiong rolled across the floor after being kicked by Big Apprentice Brother, and still couldn't figure out who had kicked them or why they were kicked. It turned out that Big Apprentice Brother just didn't like their names. He was shouting 'Dumb Bear Wild Pig, the Four Asses of Qingcheng' loudly while drinking his wine. Hou and Hong of course got mad and came over to fight, but only got kicked down the stairs of the wine house for their trouble! Ha-ha-ha!"

Lin Pingzhi felt quite happy when he heard of their humiliation. Instantly, he felt closer to this Big Apprentice Brother. Although he had never met Hou

Renying or Hong Renxiong, these two were fellow apprentices of Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao. When they got kicked down the stairs of the wine house, he could imagine how embarrassed they must have felt. Big Apprentice Brother had really helped him to vent his spleen.

"When Big Apprentice Brother took Hou and Hong down a peg," the old man continued, "they didn't know who Big Apprentice Brother was at the time, but later they found out. So Master Yu wrote a letter to our Master. The words were very polite, saying that he did not discipline his apprentices well and they had offended your brilliant disciple, so he specifically wrote this letter to apologize, so on and so forth."

"This fellow Yu is really cunning," Lu Dayou explained. "He wrote a letter of apology, but was actually complaining to Master. So because of the letter, Big Apprentice Brother had to kneel outside for a whole day and a whole night. Master finally let him off only after all the apprentices pleaded on his behalf."

"What do you mean 'let him off'?" The girl retorted. "He was beaten thirty strokes anyway."

"Hey, I got ten strokes along with Big Apprentice Brother," Lu Dayou said. "Ha-ha, but I saw Hou Renying and Hong Renxiong rolling down the stairs with such battered looks that the ten strokes was well worth it. Ha-ha, ha-ha!"

"Look at yourself; you don't have any remorse at all. The ten strokes were wasted!" the tall apprentice commented.

"How should I mend my ways?" Lu Dayou argued. "When Big Apprentice Brother wanted to kick them down the stairs, how was I supposed to stop him?"

"At least you could have tried to talk him out of it," the tall apprentice said. "Master had you pegged, 'Lu Dayou, well, he would never try to talk anybody out of mischief. Worse, he would add fuel to the flames. Ten strokes!' Ha-ha, Ha-ha!" All the other apprentices laughed as well.

"This time Master really wronged an innocent person." Lu Dayou protested. "Think about it. How fast can Big Apprentice Brother kick? The two 'heroes' rushed in from either side. Big Apprentice Brother just lifted his bowl and kept

drinking his wine in big gulps. I shouted, ‘Big Apprentice Brother, look out!’ And then I heard the loud sounds of two heavy impacts, followed by the thumping sounds of the two ‘big heroes’ as they rolled all the way down the stairs. I really would have liked to get a better view, so I could get some pointers on the use of Big Apprentice Brother’s ‘Panther Tail Kick,’ but I didn’t even have time to look, much less time to learn. How could I have added fuel to the flames?”

“Monkey-Six,” the tall apprentice said, “let me ask you, when Big Apprentice Brother was shouting ‘Dumb Bear Wild Pig, The Four Asses of Qingcheng,’ did you happen to shout along with him? Speak honestly!”

“Big Apprentice Brother had already started shouting, how could we, as junior apprentice brothers, not chime in to help? Are you telling me that I should have helped the Qingcheng Sword School to swear at Big Apprentice Brother?” Lu Dayou grinned.

“See, Master didn’t judge you wrongly at all,” The tall apprentice concluded with a laugh.

Lin Pingzhi thought, “This Monkey-Six seems to be a good guy. I wonder which school or clan they belong to?”

“We must all truly remember the words Master used to rebuke Big Apprentice Brother,” the old man said. “Master said, ‘In the Martial World, people have all kinds of nicknames: ‘Prestige of the South’, ‘Wind-Chasing Hero’, ‘Grass Top Flying Man’ and what have you. None of them should be taken so literally. How could anyone verify the accuracy of so many names? If someone wants to be called ‘Ying Xiong Hao Jie,’ fine, let him be called that. If they are truly chivalrous, then we should be eager to admire them and try to make friends with them, how could we have any thoughts of hatred? But if they are not chivalrous, then their infamy would be known in the Martial World. Everyone would look down upon them, so why should we bother with them?’”

Hearing second apprentice brother’s words, everyone nodded in agreement.

“Still, my name ‘Monkey-Six’ is much better. No one will ever get mad at it,”

Lu Dayou murmured.

"Since Big Apprentice Brother kicked Hou and Hong down the stairs," the old man continued with a smile, "this incident was seen as a huge humiliation and embarrassment for the Qingcheng Sword School, so of course none of their people ever talked about it; even among fellow apprentices, few know about it. Master had exhorted us not to let the information out, thus avoiding conflicts. So starting from now on, let's not talk about this anymore, in case somebody overhears us and spreads the story about."

"To be frank, I really think Qingcheng Kung Fu has an undeserved reputation. Even if we did offend them, it wouldn't really matter…." Lu Dayou was tempted to express his opinion.

Before he could even finish, the old man yelled at him, "Sixth apprentice brother, if you keep talking nonsense, I will have to tell Master. Maybe you'll get another ten strokes. Do you know that Big Apprentice Brother was able to kick those two down the stairs with a 'Panther Tail Kick' only because: firstly, he launched the attack unexpectedly; secondly, he is an outstanding apprentice in our school, and other apprentices are no match for him. Do you think you have the skills to kick those two down the stairs?"

"Don't compare me to Big Apprentice Brother," Lu Dayou said, sticking his tongue out and waving his hands.

"The Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School, Master Yu, is really a martial genius," the old man said with dead seriousness, "whoever underestimates him will surely be in trouble, sooner or later. Little Apprentice Sister, you have seen Master Yu before. What do you think of him?"

"Master Yu? He was so terrible, he…he frightens me; I don't…don't want to see him again," the girl exclaimed. Her voice trembled slightly, and seemed to contain traces of fear.

"Master Yu was frightening? Did you see him kill somebody?" Lu Dayou asked.

The girl shrank and did not answer the question.

“On the day our Master received the letter from Master Yu, he was so angry that he inflicted those harsh punishments on Big Apprentice Brother and sixth apprentice brother. The next day he wrote a letter and told me to send it to Mount Qingcheng…,” the old man said.

“So that was what you were doing that day when you left in such a hurry. You were actually heading to Mount Qingcheng,” several apprentices cried out.

“Yep,” the old man nodded, “at that time Master told me to not mention it to any fellow apprentices to avoid additional incidents.”

“What additional incidents? Respectful Master was just being careful. Things the Master asks us to do of course are things with good reasoning behind them. Who would agree otherwise?” Lu Dayou stated.

“What do you know?” The tall apprentice cut in. “If second apprentice brother had told you about it, you would surely have passed the message on to Big Apprentice Brother. Although Big Apprentice Brother wouldn’t disobey Master’s orders, it is very possible he would find some unusual ways to make trouble for the Qingcheng Sword School.”

“Third apprentice brother is right,” the old man agreed. “Big Apprentice Brother has many friends in the Martial World. If he really wants something done, he doesn’t necessarily have to do it himself. Master told me that the letter contained all kinds of apologetic words to Master Yu, saying that his wayward apprentice was too ill-mannered; how he found the acts reprehensible; how he should have expelled the apprentice from the school, but if he did so, everyone in the Martial World would think that conflict existed between your respectful school and our school, which wouldn’t be a good thing; now he had those two wayward apprentices….” He gave Lu Dayou a glance at these words.

“So I am a wayward apprentice as well!” Lu Dayou was displeased.

“Is placing you at the same level as Big Apprentice Brother a disgrace for you?” the girl asked.

Lu Dayou immediately became very happy. “You’re right! Get me some wine, get me some wine!” he yelled.

The teashop only had tea for sale, not wine. The waiter rushed to the table and said, “Ha you all, our teashop only has Dragon-Well, Dongting-Spring, Puer, Iron-Buddha. Ha you all, we don’t sell wine, you all.” The people of the Hengyang and Hengshan region had their own special accent, and this waiter was no exception.

“Ha you all! So ha your all’s shop doesn’t sell wine? Then I won’t drink ha your all’s wine. Ha you all!” Lu Dayou mimicked.

“Sure, sure, ha you all!” the waiter answered. He then filled all the teapots with boiled water.

The old man continued, “Master said in the letter that he had already had the two wayward apprentices harshly punished; he would have made the two go to Mount Qingcheng themselves to offer a humble apology, but the two wayward apprentices were hurt so badly from their punishment, they could not even walk; that’s why he sent his second apprentice Lao Denuo to take the rebuke in their stead; this incident was solely caused by the wayward apprentices, he hopes Master Yu does not take too much offense for the sake of the good relationship between the Qingcheng Sword School and the Huashan Sword School; when they meet in the future, he would apologize to Master Yu personally.”

“So your name is Lao Denuo and you are from the Huashan Sword School, part of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance,” Lin Pingzhi thought. When he considered the words “for the sake of the good relationship between the two” in the letter, he could feel his heart beating faster. “This Lao Denuo and the ugly girl have seen me twice. I sure hope they don’t recognize me today.”

Lao Denuo’s voice rose again, “After I arrived at Mount Qingcheng, Hou Renying did not seem to hold a grudge, but Hong Renxiong was still mad about it, and ridiculed me several times to try and pick a fight….”

“Damn! Those Qingcheng fellows are aggressive! Second apprentice brother, if he wants a fight, give him a fight! What are we afraid of? I know that fellow Hong is no match for you,” Lu Dayou said.

“Master sent me there to apologize, not to make trouble,” Lao Denuo exclaimed. “So I swallowed my pride and stayed on Mount Qingcheng for six days. I was not received by Master Yu until the seventh day.”

“Humph! Harsh attitude, huh! Second apprentice brother, I bet those six days and nights on Mount Qingcheng probably weren’t too enjoyable!” Lu Dayou interrupted again.

“There certainly was a lot of baiting,” Lao Denuo said, “but I knew that Master sent me on this not because I was any better in Kung Fu skills or the like, but because I am older, so I’d do a better job staying calm. The longer I could hold my anger, the better I could accomplish the mission. Those Qingcheng people didn’t realize that keeping me waiting for six days in the Pine-Wind Temple of Mount Qingcheng wasn’t actually doing them any good.

“During my stay in the Pine-Wind Temple, I got really bored, since they wouldn’t let me see Master Yu. On the third day, I got up early to take a walk and secretly worked on some breathing exercises to prevent my skills from getting rusty. I was wandering around when I happened to pass by the exercise field at the rear of the Pine-Wind Temple. With a glance, I saw dozens of Qingcheng apprentices, practicing their Kung Fu. Of course in the Martial World, it is considered a taboo to watch others practice their Kung Fu, so I turned around to go back to my room. But even with such a quick glance, I felt something suspicious was going on. Each of the apprentices was using a sword, and was obviously practicing the same set of sword moves. Each one seemed to have only just learned the set, because as they practiced, their moves looked quite stiff. But what sword technique was it? I couldn’t tell with my one glance very easily.

“After I went back to my room, I mulled over what I saw, and the more I thought about it, the more suspicious I became. Qingcheng Sword School has been well known for ages. Many apprentices have been part of the school for ten or twenty years, and each apprentice would have joined at a different time, so why was everyone learning the same sword technique at the same time? Particularly since among the dozens of apprentices were the so-called ‘Four

Aces of Qingcheng': Hou Renying, Hong Renxiong, Yu Renhao, and Luo Renjie. Fellow apprentice brothers, if it were you that saw this scene, what would you think?"

"Maybe the Qingcheng Sword School just acquired a secret sword art manual, or maybe Master Yu just invented a new set of sword techniques, and was teaching it to his apprentices," the apprentice with the abacus suggested.

"I was thinking the same thing in the beginning," Lao Denuo replied, "but after I thought about it more carefully, I realized that something was not quite right. With Master Yu's understanding of the sword arts, if these were newly created moves, then they must have been really outstanding moves. On the other hand, if they did acquire an ancient secret sword art manual, the moves it contained must have been excellent; otherwise he wouldn't have even bothered looking at it or asked his apprentices to practice them. New sword techniques could undo the training they had already undergone. If the moves were excellent moves, then the average apprentice wouldn't be able to understand them easily; he would have most likely chosen three or four of his top apprentices to try them out, not have over forty apprentices learn it at the same time. That's more like having someone opening a Kung Fu school for mere profit, not something a Master of a noble Martial Arts School would do.

"The next morning, I went to the rear of the temple again and strolled past the exercise field. Once again, they were practicing the same sword techniques. I did not dare to stop and watch. With a quick glance, I managed to memorize two of the moves. I figured I could ask the Master's opinion regarding them later when I got back. By that time, Master Yu still hadn't allowed me to see him, so naturally I suspected the Qingcheng Sword School was harboring a lot of hatred toward our Huashan Sword School. Perhaps they were practicing these new moves so they could use them against us. I kept telling myself I'd better be more careful."

"Second apprentice brother, could they have been practicing a new sword formation?" the tall apprentice asked.

"That was possible," Lao Denuo said, "but they were mostly practicing in

pairs; and the attacking side was using all the same type of moves as the defending side. It didn't look like a sword formation to me. The morning after that, I walked by the exercise field again, but this time the whole field was completely empty. I knew that they were trying to hide something from me, so my suspicions were aroused even more. I was just wandering by and happened to glance in their direction from far away. What secret could I have seen? It seemed that they were really practicing a powerful set of sword techniques to counter us, otherwise why would they worry so much about what I had seen?

"That night, I lay on my bed and couldn't sleep, thinking over the whole matter. Then I heard the dim clash of weapons coming from a distance. I was startled. Did some powerful enemy just invade the Pine-Wind Temple? My first thought was that perhaps Big Apprentice Brother had gotten angry because of the punishment he received from our Master, and decided to attack the Pine-Wind Temple. He was just one person, and would not be able to fight the people of the entire temple; I had to go help him. I did not bring any weapon with me when I went to Mount Qingcheng, and in my hurry, I could not stop to find a sword either, so I had to rush out with just my bare hands…."

"Amazing!" Lu Dayou praised. "Second apprentice brother, you have great courage! I would never dare to go fight Master Yu, the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School, with only my bare hands."

"Monkey-Six, what are you babbling about?" Lao Denuo yelled angrily. "I didn't say that I went to fight Master Yu with bare hands. I was just worried about Big Apprentice Brother's safety, so although I knew it was dangerous, I just had to go. Would you have me hide under my covers like a coward?" All the apprentices laughed when they heard this.

"Here I am showering you with praise and admiration, and you get angry at me?" Lu Dayou made a face.

"Thanks, but your kind of compliments don't sit well with me," Lao Denuo replied.

"Second apprentice brother, go on with the story. Don't pay any attention to

Monkey-Six," several other apprentices urged.

Lao Denuo continued, "So I got up quietly and went in the direction of the sounds. Hearing the clash of weapons getting louder and louder, my heart beat faster and faster. I thought, 'The two of us are deep in the enemy's lair now. Big Apprentice Brother has excellent Kung Fu skills. He might be able to escape without injury. But for me, it's a different story. I am in big trouble now.' I heard the sound of weapons float out from the Back Hall. All kinds of lights and candles were lit there making it seem like broad daylight. I crouched down to sneak in closer, and looked inside through the cracks of the window. Then I gasped and almost burst into laughter. It turned out I was just imagining things. Because Master Yu hadn't met with me for so many days, my imagination got carried away, and I imagined the worst thing that could happen. It wasn't Big Apprentice Brother coming to make trouble after all! There were two pairs inside practicing their sword moves. One pair was of Hou Renying and Hong Renxiong, the other pair was of Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao."

"Ha, the apprentices of the Qingcheng Sword School really work hard, not even rest at night," Lu Dayou mocked. "I guess this is what they call 'sharpening one's spear only before going into a battle,' or 'no joss sticks in fair weather, but clutching the feet of Buddha in crisis.'"

Lao Denuo gave Lu Dayou a glare and continued, "In the middle of the Back Hall sat a short Taoist priest in a blue Taoist robe. He was about fifty years old and had a thin face. By the look of him, one could tell that he weighed no more than eighty pounds. It was said in the Martial World that the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School was a short Taoist priest, but if I had not seen him with my own eyes, I wouldn't have expected him to be so short, and wouldn't have believed that he was the famous Master Yu. There were many apprentices standing around him, attentively watching the four practicing. After watching a couple of moves, I knew instantly that they were using the new moves they had been practicing over the last couple of days.

"I knew it was very dangerous for me to be there at that time. If the people from Qingcheng Sword School had found me, not only would I be harshly

punished, but the reputation of Huashan Sword School would also have been hurt badly if the news got out. Although Master punished Big Apprentice Brother harshly for kicking the top two of 'The Four Aces of Qingcheng' down the stairs, saying that he had violated the school rules and caused all kinds of trouble, and offended friends, in Master's heart, I believe he was actually glad. At least Big Apprentice Brother had gained good publicity for our school. 'How can they be the Four Aces of Qingcheng? They couldn't even fend off a single kick from the senior apprentice of the Huashan Sword School.' But if I got caught sneaking around, digging up other people's secrets, it would look worse than stealing money. And when I got back to Huashan, Master would most likely have me expelled from the Huashan Sword School.

"But seeing those people practicing so hard, I really thought it might have had something to do with our school. How could I just turn around and leave? I just kept telling myself, 'I'll just watch a couple of more moves before leaving.' But after watching a couple, I watched another couple, and so it went on and on. The sword moves they used were so unusual. I had never seen anything like them before in my life. But if someone claimed that these moves had some kind of great power, I couldn't agree. I wondered, 'This set of sword techniques is nothing special, why would the Qingcheng Sword School want to practice it so diligently, day and night? Could this set of sword techniques be to counter our Huashan sword arts?' It didn't look like it!

"After watching several more moves, I dared not continue watching anymore, so I sneaked away and went back to my room while the four were still fighting intensely. If I had waited till the four stopped fighting and the noises ended, there would have been no way for me to get away. With his superior skills, Master Yu would have found me out after my first step outside the hall.

"In the following two nights, the sound of swords ringing against each other kept coming from the distance, but I dared not go and watch any more. To be honest, if I had known that they were practicing sword fighting in front of Master Yu, I would never have dared to go there at all. The first time was just an accident. Just now sixth apprentice brother praised my courage; I did not

deserve such praise. If you had seen my face that night, you would have known how terrified I was, and you'd have called me the number one coward."

"No way! No way!" Lu Dayou objected. "Second apprentice brother, you'd be at most number two. If it were I, I wouldn't have to worry about being found out by Master Yu. I would have been so scared that my entire body would have become stiff; I would stop breathing and not be able to move an inch; pretty much no different from a zombie. No matter how outstanding Master Yu's Kung Fu skills are, he would have never known that there was a hero named Lu Dayou hiding outside his window." The apprentices broke into uproarious laughter.

"Later Master Yu finally granted me an audience," Lao Denuo continued. "He spoke in a very polite manner, saying that Master really didn't have to punish Big Apprentice Brother so harshly. The Qingcheng Sword School and the Huashan Sword School have always maintained a good relationship. The apprentices were only roughhousing with each other, just like children playing practical jokes with each other. The parents should never take such matters too seriously. That night he invited me to dinner. The following morning when I was leaving, Master Yu saw me off all the way to the gate of the Pine-Wind Temple. Since I was the apprentice, I of course, knelt down and kowtowed. Right after I knelt down on my left knee, Master Yu lifted his right hand slightly and lifted me right up. His power was amazing! It felt as if I had suddenly lost all of my strength and my body was floating in the air. If he had wanted to toss me thirty feet or simply flip me over seven or eight times, I would not have had any strength to defend myself.

"Master Yu smiled slightly and asked, 'How many more years than you has your senior apprentice brother been an apprentice of your Master? You had some prior martial arts skills before you became an apprentice to your Master, hadn't you?'

"I was still trying to catch my breath after experiencing his grip, so I had to wait a while before answering, 'Yes, I learned some martial arts skills before joining the Huashan Sword School. At the time I became an apprentice of the

Huashan Sword School, Big Apprentice Brother had been an apprentice for three years.'

"Master Yu smiled again and said, 'Three years more, hmm, three years more.'"

"What did he mean by 'three years more'?" the girl asked.

"He wore an odd expression. I guess he must have been thinking that my Kung Fu skills were mediocre, so that even if Big Apprentice Brother had studied three more years than I did, he couldn't have been too much better," Lao Denuo shrugged.

The girl hummed and then fell silent.

"After I went back to Mount Huashan, I gave Master the reply letter from Master Yu," Lao Denuo went on. "The letter was written in a very polite and modest manner, so Master was very pleased after reading it. Then, he asked about different things happening in the Pine-Wind Temple, so I told him about that night the Qingcheng apprentices practiced. Master asked me to show him a couple of the moves. I only remembered seven or eight of them, so I imitated the moves. Master said immediately when he saw them, 'Those are moves of the Evil-Resisting Sword Art of the Fortune Prestige Escort House Lin family!'"

When Lin Pingzhi heard this, his body trembled!

Chapter 3: Rescue

Translated by Lanny Lin



The door curtain was lifted, and then a little nun walked quietly into the hall. She was possessed of grace and beauty. No one would have argued that she was a perfect creation of Heaven. Although wrapped in a big and loose nun's robe, the curves of her body were apparent from her graceful movements. She walked till she stood in front of Dingyi then knelt down gracefully.

Lao Denuo continued with his story, "So I asked Master, 'Is this 'Evil-

Resisting Sword Art' something very powerful? Why would the Qingcheng Sword School practice it so intensely?'

"Master did not answer right away. He closed his eyes for a long while and then said, 'Denuo, before you became my disciple, you had already spent much time in the Martial World. In that time, what did you hear of the Chief Master of the Fortune Prestige Escort House, Lin Zhennan?'

"I answered, 'Our friends in the Martial World said that Lin Zhennan was not stingy when socializing with others; he treated his friends well. Everybody liked him and left the goods he escorted alone out of respect. But with regard to his real Kung Fu skills, I am not sure.'

"Master said, 'Right! Over the last generation, the Fortune Prestige Escort House has been successful primarily because people in the Martial World treated Lin Zhennan like a friend. Did you ever hear that Master Yu's teacher, Evergreen, was defeated by Lin Yuantu's 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art' during his youth?'

"I was lost. 'Lin…Lin Yuantu? Was he Lin Zhennan's father?' I asked.

"'No,' Master answered, 'Lin Yuantu was Lin Zhennan's grandfather. He was the original founder of the Fortune Prestige Escort House. In those days when Lin Yuantu founded the Escort House with the seventy-two moves of 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art,' none of the heterodox members of the Martial World was a match for him. Because of his great fame at that time, even orthodox members of the Martial World went to challenge him. Evergreen was one of them, and thus was defeated by several moves of the Evil-Resisting Sword Art.'

"I asked, 'So the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art' is truly very powerful?'

"Master said, 'The news that Evergreen lost the fight was kept secret by both sides, so nobody in the Martial World knew about it. However, Evergreen was a very good friend of our Grand Master and had once mentioned it to him. He considered this one of the greatest humiliations in his life, but knowing that he would never be able to defeat Lin Yuantu, he was never able to settle the score with him. Grand Master studied the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art' together with him

in order to identify flaws in this sword art. The seventy-two moves looked plain, but there were many profound mysteries locked within that no one could fathom, which allowed the moves to suddenly become very swift. The two of them studied it for several months, but still could not devise a way to counter it. At that time, I was a mere teenager who had just become an apprentice. I served them tea at those sessions and was able to watch the moves everyday, so when you demonstrated the moves, I knew they were from the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art.' Ah, time flows like a stream. That was a long time ago!'"

Ever since Lin Pingzhi had been beaten up by the Qingcheng apprentices without being able to defend himself, he had completely lost confidence in his family's Kung Fu. All he wanted was to learn from a good teacher to seek revenge later. Now hearing Lao Denuo speak of the great prestige and fame of his great grandfather, Lin Yuantu, he was greatly encouraged. Their family's "Evil-Resisting Sword Art" was really nothing to scoff at. Years ago, even the masters of the Qingcheng and Huashan sword schools could not defeat it. But if this was so, why couldn't his father defeat those Qingcheng apprentices? Perhaps his father did not learn the secret and magic parts of the sword art.

Then he heard Lao Denuo say, "I then asked Master, 'Did Evergreen ever get his revenge?'

"Master said, 'He only lost a challenged fight. That doesn't require revenge. Besides, Lin Yuantu had been famous for years and was considered an admirable senior master. Evergreen was just a little Taoist priest who barely finished training. It wasn't a big deal for a young lad to lose to a senior master. After Grand Master comforted him, they never mentioned the incident again. Evergreen died at the age of thirty-six. Maybe he could never put the incident behind him, and finally died of depression. Now, decades later, why would Yu Canghai suddenly make all of his apprentices practice the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art?' Denuo, what's your opinion on this?'

"I said, 'It seemed that everyone in the Pine-Wind Temple was quite serious about practicing; could Master Yu be planning to mount a large-scale attack against the Fortune Prestige Escort House to seek revenge for the past

generation?'

"Master nodded and said, 'I think so too. Evergreen was a narrow-minded person who thought highly of himself. He must have taken his defeat to heart. He probably left some kind of order to Yu Canghai before he passed away. Lin Yuantu died before Evergreen, so if Yu Canghai were to avenge his teacher, he could only go after Lin Zhongxiong, Lin Yuantu's son. But for some reason, he waited till now to start the attack. Yu Canghai is shrewd and deep, and always plots before attacking. There's going to be a big fight between the Qingcheng Sword School and the Fortune Prestige Escort House.'

"I asked Master, 'So in your opinion, who has a better chance of winning the fight?'

"Master smiled and said, 'Yu Canghai's Kung Fu skills have surpassed his master, Evergreen's. Lin Zhennan's Kung Fu skills, although outsiders have no idea, are probably inferior to his grandfather's. One had advanced and one had slipped back. In addition, the Qingcheng Sword School hides in the dark while the Fortune Prestige Escort House is exposed in the light; before the real fight even begins, the Fortune Prestige Escort House already has a seventy percent chance of losing. If Lin Zhennan were to get the information early and invite the Golden Blade Wang Yuanba in Luoyang to help out, then they might be able to put up a decent fight. Denuo, do you want to go watch the fun?'

"I, of course, agreed joyfully. Then the Master taught me a couple of sword moves that the Qingcheng Sword School is quite fond of, as a means of protection."

"What?" Lu Dayou jumped up. "How come Master knows moves of Qingcheng's sword art? Ah, I see. Years ago when Evergreen practiced with Grand Master, he had to use Qingcheng's sword art to counter the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art,' so Master saw them from the side."

"Sixth apprentice brother," Lao Denuo said, "as apprentices, let's not speculate on the origin of Master's Kung Fu skills. Master told me not to let any other apprentices know about this, so the information wouldn't leak out. But Little

Apprentice Sister was quite clever and somehow heard about it. She nagged Master into letting her go with me. We disguised ourselves as grandpa and granddaughter selling wine outside Fuzhou, and then everyday we would sneak into the Fortune Prestige Escort House to see what was going on. We didn't see much, other than Lin Zhennan teaching his son sword arts. When Little Apprentice Sister saw the sword art, she shook her head and said to me, 'Is this really the renowned 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art?' It's more like the Evil-Resisting-Not Sword Art. When evil comes, this Young Master Lin better hide far away.'"

Lin Pingzhi's face turned red at the laughter of the Huashan Sword School apprentices. He was so ashamed that he wished there was a hole he could crawl into. "So the two of them had been watching us in our Escort House and we knew nothing about it. We are really impotent." He couldn't help feeling very depressed.

"Not many days after we arrived in Fuzhou, apprentices of the Qingcheng Sword School drifted in one after another," Lao Denuo continued with the story. "The first two that arrived were Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao. They started sneaking into the Escort House everyday to explore the place. Little Apprentice Sister and I wanted to avoid bumping into them, so we stopped going there. It was quite a coincidence when one day, that Young Master Lin came to patronize our 'Great Wine Shop.' Little Apprentice Sister just had to bring out some wine for them. At first we thought he had found us out and intentionally came to let us know it. But when I spoke to him, I learned that he was still quite clueless. That playboy didn't know a thing and was no different from a retard. Then, guess what happened? The two most useless apprentices of the Qingcheng Sword School, Yu Renyan and Jia Renda happened to come to our 'Great Wine Shop' as well…."

"Second apprentice brother, the 'Great Wine Shop' Little Apprentice Sister and you opened must have had a booming business with all kinds of revenue pouring in. You probably made a fortune in Fujian, didn't you?" Lu Dayou applauded.

“Sure! Second apprentice brother has become quite a wealthy man now, and thanks to his luck, I was able to pick up a few crumbs as well!” the girl grinned. Everyone burst into laughter.

“Although that Young Master Lin was terrible with his Kung Fu skills and not even good enough to be Little Apprentice Sister’s student, he did have some integrity,” Lao Denuo said. “Yu Renyan, the youngest and most useless son of Yu Canghai, was so blind that he started teasing and making fun of Little Apprentice Sister. Then the Young Master Lin stepped in and tried to protect us….”

Lin Pingzhi felt both ashamed and irritated. “So the Qingcheng Sword School had deliberately planned the attacks on our Escort House, seeking revenge for their defeat in the previous generation. And the group that came to Fuzhou consisted of far more than just four. Whether I killed Yu Renyan or not didn’t matter at all.” He was so disturbed that he didn’t really listen to Lao Denuo describe how he killed Yu Renyan. But he could hear laugh after laugh; they must have been laughing at how clumsy he had been when he tried to defend himself.

Then he heard Lao Denuo say, “That night, Little Apprentice Sister and I went back to the Fortune Prestige Escort House to check things out, and saw that Hou Renying, Hong Renxiong, and other apprentices led by Master Yu had already arrived. We were afraid to be seen by the people of Qingcheng Sword School, so we just stood far away to observe. We saw them killing the escorts of the Escort House one by one, including the ones sent out to obtain help. Dead bodies were sent back to the Escort House one after another; they were merciless. At that moment, I thought to myself: The whole thing was just because Evergreen, someone from the last generation of Qingcheng, lost to Lin Yuantu in a challenge sword fight. If Master Yu wanted to settle the score, all he needed to do was to challenge and defeat Lin Zhennan and his son in a sword fight. Why did he behave so maliciously? He must have wanted to avenge Yu Renyan, but why didn’t they do anything to the Lin couple and Lin Pingzhi, and only forced them to leave the Escort House? Right after the remaining escorts

and the Lin family fled the Escort House, Master Yu went in. Then he sat smugly on the chief's chair; starting then, the Fortune Prestige Escort House belonged to the Qingcheng Sword School."

"Qingcheng Sword School wanted to get into the escorting business. Master Yu wanted to be the Chief Master Escort!" Lu Dayou exclaimed. Everyone laughed.

"The Qingcheng people had watched the Lin family disguise themselves," Lao Denuo went on. "Fang Renzhi, Yu Renhao, and Jia Renda got the order to go after them and bring them back. Little Apprentice Sister insisted on following them to watch the events unfold, so we followed the bunch of them. When the Lin family stopped by a small restaurant in the mountains south of Fuzhou, Fang Renzhi, Yu Renhao, and Jia Renda showed themselves and captured the three.

"Little Apprentice Sister said, 'It was all because of me that the Young Master Lin killed Yu Renyan. We cannot just walk away like this.'

"I tried my best to change her mind and said that if we came out and attacked the Qingcheng Sword School, we would damage the relationship between the Qingcheng Sword School and the Huashan Sword School. And since Master Yu was in Fuzhou, we also might get in big trouble."

"Second apprentice brother is old, so of course he wanted to be careful and doesn't care much for action. Little Apprentice Sister must have been very disappointed," Lu Dayou speculated.

"Little Apprentice Sister was so enthusiastic that it was hard to disappoint her even if I wanted to." Lao Denuo smiled. "So Little Apprentice Sister first went into the kitchen and cracked Jia Renda's head. When he started screaming and lured Fang and Yu away, she circled to the front to rescue Young Master Lin and let him escape."

"Terrific! Terrific!" Lu Dayou applauded. "I see! Little Apprentice Sister wasn't just saving that fellow Lin; she had something else in mind. Great! Great!"

“What other things did I have in mind? You’re talking nonsense again!” the girl said.

“Since I was beaten by Master because of the Qingcheng Sword School, Little Apprentice Sister was unhappy, so she beat up the people of the Qingcheng Sword School to vent my anger. Thank you very much….” Lu Dayou stood up and saluted the girl.

“Monkey-Six apprentice brother, you are welcome,” the girl smiled and saluted back.

“Little Apprentice Sister beat up the Qingcheng apprentice to vent someone’s anger, but I am not sure if that someone was you. It wasn’t just you, Monkey-Six, who got beaten by Master,” the apprentice with the abacus said with a broad grin.

“This time sixth apprentice brother is right,” Lao Denuo smiled. “Little Apprentice Sister really beat up Jia for sixth apprentice brother’s sake. Later if Master asks about this, she will still say so.”

“This…this is an honor I don’t want. Don’t drag me into it and get me another ten strokes of the stick,” Lu Dayou exclaimed, waving his hands.

“So didn’t Fang Renzhi and Yu Renhao chase you?” the tall apprentice asked.

“Of course they did,” the girl answered, “but second apprentice brother had learned some moves of the Qingcheng sword art, and with only the one move called ‘Swan Goose in the Sky,’ he sent their swords into the sky. Too bad second apprentice brother masked his face with a black cloth. I’ll bet that even now Fang and Yu still don’t realize that they lost to the Huashan Sword School.”

“It is better that way,” Lao Denuo said. “Otherwise, there would have been more trouble. In a straight test of skills I may not be able to win over Fang and Yu, but because I used moves from the Qingcheng sword art so unexpectedly and attacked the flaw in their technique, the two were startled, and because of that, we won again this time.”

The apprentices all agreed that if Big Apprentice Brother had known about

this, he would have been very happy and excited indeed.

It started raining more and more heavily; raindrops bounced off rooftops and street surfaces like peas. A vendor, carrying a pot of wonton and his cooking utensils balanced on the ends of a pole, appeared from the rain and stopped under the eaves of the teashop to take shelter. The old man started to knock on a bamboo block to attract customers. Hot steam was coming out of his pot.

The Huashan apprentices had been hungry for quite a while, so when they saw the wonton vendor, they were all quite pleased.

"Hey, make nine servings of wonton for us, please. Extra eggs," Lu Dayou shouted.

"Yes, sir!" the old man answered, and then opened the pot lid and threw the wontons into the hot soup. Moments later, five bowls of wonton were ready for the apprentices.

Lu Dayou was well behaved. He gave the first bowl to second apprentice brother, Lao Denuo, the second bowl to third apprentice brother, Liang Fa, and the next two bowls to fourth apprentice brother, Shi Daizi, and fifth apprentice brother, Gao Genming, respectively. He should have taken the next bowl, but he put it in front of Little Apprentice Sister instead.

"Little Apprentice Sister, after you," he said.

The girl had been teasing him all the time, calling him Monkey-Six and all, but when he gave the wonton to her, she stood up and replied respectfully, "Thanks! Apprentice brother!"

Lin Pingzhi observed everything from his vantage point by the side, and thought that they had very strict school rules; it was okay to joke around, but all had to abide by the rule of seniority.

Lao Denuo and the others began to eat, but the girl waited till Lu Dayou and all the other apprentice brothers had their bowls of wonton before eating her own.

"Second apprentice brother, you were just talking about how Master Yu took

over the Fortune Prestige Escort House. What happened after that?" Liang Fa asked.

"After Little Apprentice Sister rescued that Young Master Lin," Lao Denuo replied, "she wanted to follow them secretly and wait for a chance to rescue the Lin couple. I pleaded with her, 'Yu Renyan offended you the other day, and the Young Master Lin helped you. You felt gratitude and rescued him, that's enough payback already. The score between the Qingcheng Sword School and the Fortune Prestige Escort House came from the previous generation; why should we interfere?' Little Apprentice Sister finally agreed. Then the two of us went back to Fuzhou and saw over ten Qingcheng apprentices guarding the Fortune Prestige Escort House.

"That was somewhat strange. Everyone in the Escort House had fled in a rush; even the Lin couple was gone; what was the Qingcheng Sword School afraid of? Little Apprentice Sister and I could not figure it out and became quite curious, so we decided to investigate. We figured that since Qingcheng apprentices was guarding the place so tightly, it would be very hard to get in at night, so we sneaked into the garden at dusk while they were changing shifts for dinner. After we got into the Escort House, we saw many Qingcheng apprentices busily rummaging through chests and cupboards; some were taking down walls; others were digging up the ground. It seemed that they had turned the entire Escort House upside down. There was gold and treasure the Escorts did not have time to take with them, but those were just thrown to one side and ignored. They must have been looking for something very important, but what was it?"

"The Evil-Resisting Sword Art Manuscript!" four Huashan apprentices said almost in unison.

"Correct!" Lao Denuo said. "Little Apprentice Sister and I came to that same conclusion. It was obvious that they started searching right after they took over the Fortune Prestige Escort House. Seeing them all searching and sweating so hard, we knew that they hadn't gotten any results."

"So did they find it eventually?" Lu Dayou asked.

“Little Apprentice Sister and I both wanted to see the outcome,” Lao Denuo said, “but those Qingcheng people searched so thoroughly that they didn’t even forget to search the outhouses. Little Apprentice Sister and I really had nowhere to hide and had to sneak away.”

“Second apprentice brother, do you think Master Yu was making a fuss over a trivial matter by going there and leading the operation himself?” fifth apprentice Gao Genming asked.

Lao Denuo answered, “Master Yu’s teacher had lost to Lin Yuantu’s ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art;’ whether Lin Zhennan was an unworthy descendant or an even stronger opponent, outsiders would not have known. It might not have been proper for Master Yu to only send a couple of apprentices to settle the score. He went to Fuzhou himself and also urged all his apprentices to practice the sword art, then prepared in advance to start the attack. I wouldn’t really call this making a fuss. But from what I saw, I think that for him, revenge was only of secondary importance, while finding that sword art manuscript was the main priority.”

“Second apprentice brother, you saw them practicing the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’ in Pine-Wind Temple. If they had already known how to use this sword art, why bother looking for the sword art manuscript? Perhaps they were looking for something else,” fourth apprentice Shi Daizi suggested.

“I don’t think so.” Lao Denuo shook his head. “What else besides secret martial art techniques could have interested Master Yu, a master of martial arts, so much that he would be willing to spend so much effort on it? Later at the Yushan town in Jiangxi Province, Little Apprentice Sister and I met them again and heard Master Yu asking messenger apprentices from other provinces whether they had found the thing. He looked worried, so it seemed that nobody had actually found it yet.”

Shi Daizi still could not understand. He scratched his head and asked, “They already knew how to use this set of sword arts, why would they bother looking for the sword art manuscript? How strange!”

“Think about it, fourth apprentice brother,” Lao Denuo explained. “Years ago, Lin Yuantu was able to defeat Evergreen; the sword art must have been truly outstanding. But not only was the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’ that Evergreen remembered nothing out of the ordinary, Master Yu also saw with his own eyes that the Kung Fu skills of the Lin family were not even worth mentioning. Something was just not making sense.”

“What do you mean?” Shi Daizi asked.

“There must be some secrets to the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’ of the Lin Family,” Lao Denuo exclaimed. “Although the moves appear average, the power of the sword art could be very strong. And Lin Zhennan did not get to learn these secrets.”

Shi Daizi thought for a while and nodded, “That’s right. But secret methods for sword arts are normally only passed down by one’s master orally. Lin Yuantu has been dead for decades, and even if they could find his coffin and dig up his body, it wouldn’t help them at all.”

“The secret code for our own sword art is taught orally by Master in spoken words, with no written parts, but not every school or clan necessarily has to be like that,” Lao Denuo said.

“Second apprentice brother, I still don’t understand,” Shi Daizi said. “It was logical that before their attack they would want the manuscript for the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art.’ Know the enemy and know yourself; this way, you can win every battle. They wanted to defeat the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art,’ so it was better if they knew the secret within the sword art. But the Qingcheng Sword School has already captured the Lin couple, and the Headquarters and Escort House branches have all been wiped out. What score is there left to settle? Even if there really was a powerful secret in the sword art, why should they bother looking for it?”

“Fourth brother, what is your evaluation of Qingcheng’s Kung Fu compared to the Kung Fu of our Five Mountains Sword Alliance?” Lao Denuo asked.

“I don’t know,” Shi Daizi answered. After a short while he said, “Perhaps not

as good."

"That's right, probably not as good as ours," Lao Denuo said. "Think about it. Master Yu is a conceited, arrogant man. Doesn't he want his fame to be greater than everyone else in the Martial World? If the Lin Family really had some kind of secret technique, something which could change the average sword moves of the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art' into something very powerful, then if they used this secret technique with their Qingcheng sword art, what would happen?"

Shi Daizi thought for a long while and suddenly struck the table heavily as he stood up and shouted, "I see! Yu Canghai wants his Qingcheng sword art to be number one in the Martial World!"

Right at that moment, sounds of footsteps floated in from the street outside. Everyone in the teashop turned and saw a group of people rush toward the teashop in quick steps. From the way they ran, one could tell that they were all Martial people. They were all dressed in oilcloth raincoats, and as they got closer, everyone saw that it was a group of Buddhist nuns.

The leading old nun was a tall one, and stopping right in front of the teashop, she shouted, "Linghu Chong, come out!"

Lao Denuo and the other apprentices recognized the old nun. She was Sister Dingyi, the Master of the White-Cloud Nunnery atop Mount Heng-Shan. She was also the junior apprentice sister of Sister Dingxian, the Head Master of the Heng-Shan Sword School. Not only was she a famous Master within the Heng-Shan Sword School, she was also a renowned master of great fame in the Martial World, and all Martial people considered her a tough fighter. All the Huashan apprentices stood up and saluted her respectfully.

"We hereby pay our respect to Uncle-Master!"[30] Lao Denuo said loudly.

Sister Dingyi glanced over everyone and yelled in a husky voice, "Where is Linghu Chong hiding? Get his ass out here!" Her voice was even huskier than that of a man.

"Uncle-Master, senior apprentice brother Linghu is not here. We have been

waiting for him, and he hasn't arrived yet," Lao Denuo replied.

"So this Big Apprentice Brother they were talking about is named Linghu Chong. He really seems like a troublemaker. What did he do to make this old nun so mad?" Lin Pingzhi thought to himself.

Sister Dingyi surveyed the teashop and stopped in front of the girl's face. "Are you Lingshan? Why are you disguised like that? To scare people?" she asked.

"There were some bad men who wanted to harass me, so I disguised myself to hide for a while," the girl answered with a smile.

Dingyi gave a snort. "The rules of your Huashan Sword School are getting looser and looser. Your father is too lax with his apprentices, and that is exactly what encourages them to cause trouble wherever they go. When I finish my business here, I'm going to have to go to Mount Huashan myself, and discuss this with him."

"Uncle-Master, please don't do that!" Lingshan begged worriedly. "Big Apprentice Brother just got punished with thirty strokes from Father recently. He was wounded so badly that he could barely walk. If you talk to my father, he might get another sixty strokes of the stick. That would kill him!"

"The earlier that animal gets killed, the better. Lingshan, how can you lie to my face! Linghu Chong could barely walk? If he could barely walk, how did he manage to kidnap my little apprentice?" Sister Dingyi bellowed.

Hearing those words, the faces of the Huashan apprentices turned pale with horror.

Lingshan almost cried. "Uncle-Master," she said hurriedly, "that's impossible! No matter how bold Big Apprentice Brother is, he would never dare to offend fellow apprentice sisters of your respectful school. Somebody must be making up stories to sow discord with Uncle-Master."

"You still deny it? Yiguang, what did the apprentice from the Taishan Sword School tell you?" Dingyi barked.

A middle-aged nun stepped forward. "Apprentice brothers from the Taishan

Sword School said that Priest Tian-Song saw apprentice brother Linghu and junior sister Yilin drinking together in a wine house in the town of Hengyang. The wine house was called something like Huiyan House. Junior sister Yilin had obviously been seized by apprentice brother Linghu and coerced into drinking the wine. She looked…looked very upset. And drinking together with them was that…that…villain who stops at no evil…Tian…Tian Boguang."

Dingyi had already known this, but even hearing this the second time around, she became just as angry as before. She struck the table heavily with her palm. Two bowls of wonton jumped off the table and smashed onto the ground.

The Huashan apprentices all looked very embarrassed. Lingshan was so worried that tears began to roll down her cheeks. "They must be lying, or…or maybe Uncle-Master Tian-Song saw a different person," she said in a trembling voice.

"We all know who Priest Tian-Song of Taishan Sword School is," Dingyi exclaimed loudly. "How could he be mistaken? How could he ever speak nonsense? This animal Linghu Chong, he even gets along with an evil person like Tian Boguang. He has sunk very low. Even if your Master doesn't handle this seriously and covers for his students, I won't let him go so easily. This 'Ten Thousand Miles Loner' Tian Boguang has been a plague on society. I, an old nun, must rid the people of the scourge. When I heard the news and went there, Tian Boguang and Linghu Chong had already spirited Yilin away! I…I…looked everywhere but still couldn't find them…." Her voice became hoarse. She stamped her feet on the ground and sighed, "Oh, Yilin, my child. Yilin, my child!"

The Huashan apprentices' hearts were beating rapidly. That Big Apprentice Brother dragging a nun of the Heng-Shan Sword School off to a wine house to drink and staining the nun's reputation was already a clear violation of school rules; to make matters worse, he made friends with someone like Tian Boguang!

After a long pause, Lao Denuo was finally able to collect himself and speak again.

“Uncle-Master, maybe senior apprentice brother Linghu was at the same table of Tian Boguang only by chance; that doesn’t really make them friends. Senior apprentice brother Linghu has been quite drunk these days and probably was a little hazy. What one does when drunk shouldn’t really count….”

“A drunk still has thirty percent of his faculties. As a mature adult, can’t he even distinguish between good and evil?” Dingyi roared.

“Yes, Uncle-Master!” Lao Denuo said hastily, not daring to argue. “I wonder where senior apprentice brother Linghu might be right now. Let us apprentices find him and reproach him; we’ll have him come and kowtow to apologize to you first, Uncle-Master, and then report to my Master so he can administer a heavy punishment.”

“Am I here to discipline your apprentice brother?” Dingyi snarled. Her arm shot out suddenly and grabbed Lingshan by the wrist. Lingshan felt as if an iron hoop had bound her wrist. “Ah!” She cried out and then muttered in a trembling voice, “Uncle…Uncle-Master!”

“Your Huashan Sword School kidnapped my Yilin. I am taking a female apprentice of your Huashan Sword School in exchange. When you return my Yilin to me, I will release your Lingshan!” Dingyi growled. She turned around and dragged Lingshan after her. Lingshan felt her upper body become sore and numb, and had to stagger along with Dingyi into the street.

Lao Denuo and Liang Fa both jumped forth instantly to block Sister Dingyi’s way.

“Uncle-Master,” Lao Denuo bowed and said apologetically, “my Big Apprentice Brother offended you; naturally you would be angry, but that really has nothing to do with Little Apprentice Sister. Uncle-Master, please show mercy and let her go.”

“Sure, I will!” Dingyi yelled scornfully. She raised her right arm and swept it out in an arc.

Lao Denuo and Liang Fa felt a strong burst of energy shooting toward them, so strong that they could hardly breathe. They then found themselves flying

backwards. Lao Denuo landed on his back at the door of the shop across the street from the teashop. With a splintering crack, two of the door planks broke in half. Liang Fa flew straight toward a wonton stove. If he had landed on the wonton stove and knocked it over, boiling water would have splashed all over him and scalded him badly. But the old wonton seller reached out with his left hand and caught Liang Fa by his back, so Liang Fa landed safely.

Sister Dingyi turned back and stared at the old wonton seller. “So it’s you!” she said.

“That’s right, it’s me,” the old man smiled. “Sister, you’ve got quite a temper.”

“That’s none of your concern,” Dingyi snapped.

Right at that moment, with oilcloth umbrellas over their heads and lanterns in their hands, two men rushed toward the teashop. “Are you the respectful Sister of the Heng-Shan Sword School?” they shouted from afar.

“You flatter me. I am Dingyi of the Heng-Shan Sword School. Who are you?” Dingyi asked.

When the two men came closer, the two big red words written on the lanterns in their hands also became more recognizable. It read, “Liu House.”

“We junior apprentices were instructed by our Master to invite Uncle-Master Dingyi and all the fellow apprentice sisters to have dinner at our humble house,” one said. “We didn’t get the news that you had already arrived at Hengshan, so we didn’t greet you at the gate. Please pardon us.” He bowed to pay his respect.

“That is very polite of you. Are you two apprentices of Master Liu?” Dingyi asked in a slightly softer tone.

“Yes. My name is Xiang Danian, and this is my apprentice brother Mi Weiyi. How are you, Uncle-Master?” The two saluted again.

Seeing the good manners of the pair, Dingyi agreed, “All right, we were just about to go visit Master Liu, anyway.”

“May I ask who you are?” Xiang Danian asked Liang Fa.

“I am Liang Fa, apprentice of the Huashan Sword School,” Liang Fa answered.

“You are the senior third brother Liang of the Huashan Sword School!” Xiang Danian said happily. “I have been looking forward to meeting you. Everyone please come to our humble house. Our Master told us to greet all the heroes from different groups, but there are so many people coming, we are afraid that we have been poor hosts and offended friends. Please come this way.”

“We were planning to wait here until Big Apprentice Brother shows up, and then go to congratulate Uncle-Master Liu together,” Lao Denuo went over and said.

“You must be second apprentice brother Lao,” Xiang Danian said. “My Master always praises Huashan apprentice brothers studying under Uncle-Master Yue. Especially apprentice brother Linghu, a very outstanding young hero. Since apprentice brother Linghu is not here yet, why don’t you come first?”

Lao Denuo pondered the situation in his head. “Little Apprentice Sister is under the control of Uncle-Master Dingyi, and it seems that she won’t let her go easily. We simply have no other choice but to go with her.” At that thought, he answered, “I hope this will not be an inconvenience.”

“Your coming to Hengshan is an honor. Why be so modest? Please! Please!” Xiang Danian greeted.

“Aren’t you going to invite this one?” Dingyi pointed at the old wonton seller.

Xiang Danian looked at the old man for a moment before he recognized him. “So, it is Uncle-Master He[31] from Mount Yandang!” He bowed. “What a lack of manners on my part. Uncle-Master He, will you please come to our humble house as well?”

He had guessed that this old wonton seller was the master from Mount Yandang, He Sanqi. He Sanqi made a living by selling wontons when he was young. Even after he became proficient in the martial arts, he still carried his wonton stove with him when he wandered about. The wonton stove was more

or less like his trademark. Although he had tremendous skills, he did not seek fame or wealth, and was content to live off his small business. Everyone in the Martial World respected him. There were thousands of people selling wonton on streets and in alleys; the only one that sold wontons and also had excellent Kung Fu skills would have to be He Sanqi.

"I'll go," He Sanqi said with a smile, and started to clear off the wonton bowls on the table.

"We junior apprentices didn't recognize you, respectful Master. I hope senior Master does not mind," Lao Denuo said apologetically.

"Not at all, not at all. You came to me as my good customers, why would I mind? Nine bowls of wonton, ten coins a piece. That means you owe me ninety coins." He Sanqi extended his left palm out after the words.

Lao Denuo was very embarrassed, and wasn't sure if He Sanqi was just kidding.

"Hey, pay the bill after you eat. He Sanqi never said he was letting you eat for free," Dingyi said.

"Yeah, small business, cash only. No credits or late payments, not even for relatives or close friends," He Sanqi announced.

"Of course, of course," Lao Denuo answered. He dared not to give any extra, so he counted ninety copper coins carefully and handed the money over respectfully with both hands.

He Sanqi took the money, and then turned to Dingyi, with his palm out. "You broke two of my bowls and two china spoons. That comes to a total of fourteen coins."

"You penny-pinching skinflint! You even cheat money from nuns. Yiguang, pay him the money," Dingyi chortled.

Yiguang counted fourteen coins and handed over the money respectfully with both hands. He Sanqi took the money, threw the coins into a bamboo tube by the wonton stove, and then lifted the stove and said, "Let's go!"

“We’ll take care of all the bills later. Write them up under Master Liu,” Xiang Danian said to the teashop waiter.

“Ha you all, they are all Master Liu’s guests ha you all. It is an honor to have them here ha you all. Forget about the bills, ha you all. It’s on the house,” the waiter said, beaming.

Xiang Danian distributed the umbrellas they had brought with them and then led the way at the front. Dingyi dragged the girl Lingshan of Huashan Sword School and walked side by side with He Sanqi. All the Huashan apprentices and Heng-Shan apprentices followed behind.

Lin Pingzhi thought to himself, “Let me follow them from far behind. Let’s see if I can sneak into Liu Zhengfeng’s house by chance.”

After the group turned a corner, he stood up and walked to the corner of the street. The group was heading north, so he followed in the heavy rain by walking under the eaves by the street. After walking three long streets, he saw a big mansion on the left side of the street. Four big lanterns in front illuminated the gate. About ten people stood in front, some holding torches and others holding umbrellas, busily greeting guests. After Dingyi, He Sanqi, and the others walked into the house, more guests approached the house from both ends of the street.

Lin Pingzhi plucked up his courage and walked to the gate. Two groups of guests happened to be going into the mansion led by an apprentice of the Liu House. Lin Pingzhi followed them in quietly. The greeting apprentices thought he was one of the guests and greeted, “Come in please! Have some tea please.”

Lin Pingzhi stepped into the crowded great hall. There were over two hundred people sitting at different tables and talking to each other. Lin Pingzhi calmed down a little. “There are so many people here; no one will ever pay any attention to me. I just need to find those Qingcheng villains, then I’ll be able to find out where my mom and dad are.” So he sat down at a small table in a dark corner. Soon, servants brought tea, snacks, and hot towels for him.

He looked around, and saw the nuns of Heng-Shan Sword School sitting at a

table to the left. The apprentices of Huashan Sword School were sitting around another table nearby. The girl Lingshan was also sitting there. It seemed that Dingyi had decided to let her go. But Dingyi and He Sanqi were not among them.

Lin Pingzhi surveyed one table after another, and felt a sudden shock when he saw Fang Renzhi, Yu Renhao, and a bunch of others sitting around two tables. Obviously they were all apprentices of the Qingcheng Sword School. His parents weren't among them. He wondered where they could be kept. Feeling both sad and angry, and also fearful that his parents were already dead, he felt a strong urge to move to a table closer to them, so he could overhear some of their conversation. But considering that it had been so difficult for him to get this far, if he acted recklessly and attracted the attention of Fang Renzhi and his fellows, he would not only have wasted all his efforts so far, but would also be getting himself into a fatal situation.

A disturbance suddenly started from near the gate. Several men in blue robes came in hurriedly carrying two door planks. Two men lay on the door planks. They were covered with white sheets that were soaked with blood. People in the hall soon gathered around them to have a closer look.

"They are from the Taishan Sword School!" Somebody muttered. "That's Priest Tian-Song of the Taishan Sword School. Wow, that wound on him looks fatal. Who's the other one?"

"He's an apprentice of Priest Tian-Men – the Head Master of the Taishan Sword School. His name is Chi. Is he dead already?"

"Sure. Dead! Look at that knife wound – in from his chest and out his back, how could he survive that?"

Amid the uproar, the dead one and the wounded one were both carried into the Back Hall. Many people followed them there. The ones remaining in the great hall all began to talk about the incident.

"Priest Tian-Song is an excellent fighter from the Taishan Sword School. Who would be so bold as to challenge him?"

“If this person could wound Priest Tian-Song, he obviously has better Kung Fu skills. Better skills, more courage, that’s why.”

While the crowd was still discussing the incident, Xiang Danian emerged from the Back Hall and went straight to the table where all the apprentices from the Huashan Sword School were gathered.

“Apprentice brother Lao, my Master would like to have a word with you. Will you please come with me?” he asked Lao Denuo.

“Sure,” Lao Denuo answered. He stood up and followed Xiang Danian into the inner room.

They went through a long hallway, and then into a side hall. There were five armchairs placed side by side at the north end of the hall. Four of them were empty, while a big red-faced Taoist priest occupied the easternmost chair. Lao Denuo knew that these five armchairs were reserved for the five Head Masters of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. The Head Masters of Songshan, Heng-Shan, Huashan, and Hengshan hadn’t arrived yet. This red-faced Taoist priest was none other than the Head Master of the Taishan Sword School, Priest Tian-Men. Nineteen senior masters sat by his sides. Sister Dingyi from the Heng-Shan Sword School, Yu Canghai from the Qingcheng Sword School and He Sanqi from Mount Yandang were all among them. At the south end of the hall, upon the seat for the host, sat a short, fat, middle-aged man in expensive dark red-brown robes of silk. He was the host Liu Zhengfeng.

Lao Denuo first saluted the host Liu Zhengfeng, and then knelt down in front of Priest Tian-Men with a greeting, “Apprentice of Huashan Sword School, Lao Denuo, pays his respect to Uncle-Master Tian-Men.”

Priest Tian-Men appeared to be full of rage, and seemed to be on the verge of exploding. “Where is Linghu Chong?” he bellowed, striking the arm of the chair heavily with his left hand. His voice was so astounding that it sounded like thunder from the sky. Even the people in the great hall could hear him and everyone shuddered.

“Third apprentice brother, they are looking for Big Apprentice Brother again!”

the young girl Lingshan cried.

Liang Fa nodded but did not say a word. After a while, he whispered, “Let’s all stay calm! There are so many people gathered here from different places; don’t let them look upon our Huashan Sword School with scorn.”

Lin Pingzhi couldn’t help thinking, “They are looking for Linghu Chong again. This old fellow Linghu certainly has a knack for getting into trouble.”

Back at the Side Hall, Lao Denuo’s ears were almost deafened by the resounding bellow from Priest Tian-Men. He had to remain kneeling for quite a while before he could get a grip of himself and stand up again.

“Uncle-Master, apprentice brother Linghu went separately from us in the town of Hengyang,” he answered. “We had planned to meet in Hengshan and then come to the Liu House to congratulate Uncle-Master Liu. If he doesn’t make it today, he will surely come tomorrow.”

“He still dares to come? He still has the gall to come? Linghu Chong is the Big Apprentice Brother of your Huashan Sword School. Isn’t he supposed to be on the chivalrous side of the Martial World? What is he doing hanging around with that wicked rapist who stops at no evil, Tian Boguang! What does he think he is doing?” Priest Tian-Men roared angrily.

“From what I know, Big Apprentice Brother does not know Tian Boguang at all. Big Apprentice Brother is always fond of drinking; maybe he didn’t know it was Tian Boguang that he was drinking with,” Lao Denuo tried to speculate.

Stamping his foot on the floor heavily, Priest Tian-Men stood up. “You are foolish to defend that damn swine Linghu Chong,” he snarled, his voice filled with rage. “Apprentice brother Tian-Song, you…you tell him how you were wounded. Tell him whether Linghu Chong knew Tian Boguang.”

Two door planks were laid on the floor to the west. A dead body lay on one, and a long-bearded Taoist priest lay on the other. The priest’s face appeared almost as white as a sheet, and blood soaked through his entire beard. In a very low voice, he started talking.

“This morning…I…I was with nephew apprentice Chi at the Huiyan…Huiyan Wine House in…Hengyang. We saw Linghu Chong…together with Tian Boguang and a little nun….” He had to stop to catch his breath before finishing the words.

“Brother Tian-Song, you don’t have to repeat the story. I will tell him what you said earlier,” Liu Zhengfeng volunteered. Turning his head to Lao Denuo, he said, “Nephew apprentice Lao, nephew apprentice Linghu and you fellow apprentices came a long way to my ceremony. I really appreciate the good will of apprentice brother Yue and all of you nephew apprentices. But we don’t know how nephew apprentice Linghu met Tian Boguang, and so we must find out the truth. Since our Five Mountains Sword Alliance is like a big family, if nephew apprentice Linghu has truly done something wrong, it is up to us to give him some advice….”

“What advice? Purge the school by chopping off his head!” Priest Tian-Men shouted angrily.

“Apprentice brother Yue is always strict with respect to school rules, and the Huashan Sword School has always had a first-class reputation. This time nephew Linghu really went a little bit too far,” Liu Zhengfeng said with a sigh.

“You still call him a nephew? Nephew my ass!” Priest Tian-Men swore angrily. After the words came out, he realized that as a Head Master of a big sword school, it was really not appropriate for him to use such foul language in front of Sister Dingyi. But it was already too late to take it back. So he let out a loud breath and sat back down angrily.

“Uncle-Master Liu, would you be kind enough to tell me what happened?” Lao Denuo requested.

Liu Zhengfeng said, “Just now, priest brother Tian-Song told us that this morning, he went to the Huiyan Wine House in Hengyang with Chi Baicheng, the apprentice of priest brother Tian-Men, to have a couple of drinks. When they went up to the wine house on the second floor, they saw three people drinking and eating there: the wicked rapist Tian Boguang, nephew apprentice

Linghu, and the little apprentice of Sister Dingyi, Yilin. Priest brother Tian-Song felt it was very strange. He didn't know any of those three, but from their clothing, he could tell that one was an apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, and one was an apprentice of the Heng-Shan Sword School. Please hold your anger, Sister Dingyi. Nephew apprentice Yilin was coerced; it was obvious that she was not there of her own free will.

"Priest brother Tian-Song said that Tian Boguang was a man of about thirty years of age dressed in nice clothes. He didn't know who the man was, but later he heard nephew apprentice Linghu saying, 'Brother Tian, although you have Qing-Gong[32] skills unsurpassed in the entire Martial World, if you have really bad luck, no matter how good your Qing-Gong skills are, you won't be able to escape.' Since his surname was Tian and he had the best Qing-Gong skills in the Martial World, there was no doubt he must have been 'Ten Thousand Miles Loner' Tian Boguang. Priest brother Tian-Song is one who hates evil as if it was his personal enemy. When he saw the three drinking and eating together, of course he was enraged."

"Yes!" Lao Denuo answered, thinking, "Three people drank together in the Huiyan Wine House. One was the infamous rapist, one was a little nun, and the other was the big senior apprentice of our Huashan Sword School; it was indeed quite an odd scene."

Liu Zhengfeng continued, "He then heard Tian Boguang saying, 'I, Tian Boguang, come and go as I please, traveling around the world alone. What's there to worry about? Since we have already seen this little nun, why not just let her stay here and accompany us…?'"

At Liu Zhengfeng's words, Lao Denuo cast a suspicious glance at him, and then also sneaked an equally suspicious peek from the corner of his eyes at Priest Tian-Song. Liu Zhengfeng understood instantly.

"Priest brother Tian-Song is wounded very badly," he said. "Of course he was unable to tell everything so clearly and continuously. I added some of my own words, but the main idea is just the same. Priest brother Tian-Song, is that

right?”

“Yes…yes, correct…correct!” Tian-Song managed to answer.

With that confirmation, Liu Zhengfeng went on, “Nephew apprentice Chi Baicheng couldn’t stand it any more, so he struck the table with his hand and shouted, ‘Are you the evil rapist Tian Boguang? Everyone in the Martial World wants to kill you to rid the world of a scourge like you, yet here you are, bragging about yourself shamelessly. You must be tired of living!’ He drew his weapon and jumped forward to fight. Unfortunately, he was slain by Tian Boguang. It was really a pity that an outstanding young man lost his life to such an evil rapist. Priest brother Tian-Song then jumped forth to fight with Tian Boguang. They fought for several hundreds rounds. Priest brother Tian-Song wasn’t cautious enough and in the end was wounded in the chest thanks to Tian Boguang’s dirty tricks. Afterwards, nephew apprentice Linghu still sat with the evil rapist and the two drank together. That is really contrary to the creed of our Five Mountains Sword Alliance. That’s why priest brother Tian-Men is so angry.”

“What happened to our ideals of unity?” Priest Tian-Men snarled. “We martial people should be able to tell right from wrong. Associating with such an evil rapist…such an evil rapist…!” His face turned scarlet with anger, and it almost seemed that his beard bristled.

Suddenly someone called from outside of the door, “Master, I have something to report.”

Priest Tian-Men recognized it as the voice of one of his apprentices. “Come in!” he said. “What’s the matter?”

A young man about thirty years of age walked in. He first saluted to the host, Liu Zhengfeng, and all other senior masters, then he turned to Priest Tian-Men and reported.

“Master, Uncle-Master Tianbai sent us the message that he has led the search for Tian Boguang and Linghu Chong the two evil rapists, with apprentices of our school, but hasn’t found any trace of them….”

Hearing Big Apprentice Brother being classified in the “evil rapist” group, Lao Denuo felt quite embarrassed. But it seemed Big Apprentice Brother was really consorting with Tian Boguang, so what could he say?

“But outside the town of Hengyang, we found a corpse with a sword in his abdomen. The sword belonged to the evil rapist Linghu Chong…,” the Taishan Sword School apprentice continued.

“Who was the deceased?” Priest Tian-Men asked hurriedly.

The young man gave a quick glance at Yu Canghai before answering, “He was an apprentice brother of Uncle-Master Yu. At the time when we found the body, nobody knew who he was. After we took the body back to town, someone recognized him to be apprentice brother Luo Renjie….”

Yu Canghai uttered a cry of shock and stood up instantly. “It was Renjie? Where’s the body?”

“Here it is,” someone answered from outside.

Yu Canghai was a man with good self-control. Although the unexpected bad news hit him hard, and the deceased was one of the four best apprentices of Qingcheng “Ying Xiong Hao Jie,” he maintained his composure. “Nephew apprentice, please carry the body in,” he said.

“Yes,” the apprentice outside the door responded.

Two men carried in a door plank. One of the two was an apprentice of the Hengshan Sword School, and the other was an apprentice of the Qingcheng Sword School. On the plank was a body with a sword thrust into his abdomen and going up at an angle. The sword was about three feet long, but the part protruding from the body was less than one foot long. Apparently, the tip of the sword went all the way up into the corpse’s throat. It was very rare to see this type of ruthless move that began from the bottom and moved upwards in the Martial World.

“Linghu Chong, humph, Linghu Chong, how…how vicious you are,” Yu Canghai murmured.

“Uncle-Master sent the message that he is still searching for the two evil rapists. It would be better if one or two of the Uncle-Masters here could go and give him a helping hand,” the Taishan apprentice continued.

“I’ll go!” Dingyi and Yu Canghai said almost in unison.

Right at that moment, a sweet and lovely voice came from outside of the door, “Master, I am back!”

Dingyi’s expression changed immediately. “Is that Yilin? Get in here right now!” she shouted.

Everybody looked at the doorway, wanting to take a good look at this little nun who was bold enough to drink in public with two evil rapists. The door curtain was lifted, and when the little nun walked quietly into the hall, everyone felt as if the whole room had suddenly been brightened up. She possessed grace and beauty. No one would have argued that she was a perfect creation of Heaven. She was only about sixteen years of age, and although she was wrapped in a big and loose nun’s robe, the curves of her body were apparent from her graceful movements. She walked till she stood in front of Dingyi, then knelt down and called out, “Master…!” After saying this, she suddenly burst into tears.

Dingyi straightened her face. “You…what happened? How were you able to get away?” she asked anxiously.

“Master, I…I thought I would never see you again,” Yilin said in tears. Her voice was sweet and charming, and the two little hands clutching Dingyi’s sleeves were so white they almost looked like they were carved from jade.

“How could such a beauty become a nun?” many in the room couldn’t help thinking to themselves.

Yu Canghai gave her only a quick glance, and then went back to staring at the sword in Luo Renjie’s body. There were green tassels attached to the handle of the sword. Near the handle, the words “Huashan Linghu Chong” were etched on the blade. He looked around and saw Lao Denuo carrying on his waist the same kind of sword with green tassels attached to the handle. All of a sudden, he

jumped toward Lao Denuo and thrust his fingers toward Lao Denuo's eyes. The attack was as swift as it was fierce, and in an instant, the tips of his fingers had touched Lao Denuo's eyelid. Lao Denuo was startled and hurriedly raised his arms to block the attack using a move called "Raise Fire to Burn Sky." With a sneer, Yu Canghai rounded his left hand in a very small circle, and grabbed Lao Denuo's hands in his left palm. Extending his right arm, he quickly unsheathed the sword by Lao Denuo's waist.

Lao Denuo pulled hard in an effort to free his hands, which were being held by Yu Canghai, but failed miserably. A split of a second later, he found the tip of his own sword pointing right at his chest. "I…I am not involved!" he shouted out frantically.

Yu Canghai looked at the blade of the sword. There were words saying "Huashan Lao Denuo." The size and the style of the words matched the other sword exactly. Lowering his wrist, he pointed the sword toward Lao Denuo's stomach, and spoke grimly.

"Which move in your respectful Huashan Sword Art is this one that thrusts from the bottom up at an angle?"

Lao Denuo could feel cold sweat dripping from his forehead. "Our…our Huashan Sword Art does not have…have such a move," he muttered in a quavering voice.

Yu Canghai thought, "The move that killed Renjie was thrust up from the lower abdomen, and the tip of the sword went all the way to the throat. Did Linghu Chong bend over and thrust upward from his backside? But after this killing, why didn't he take his sword but intentionally left this evidence? Is he challenging the Qingcheng Sword School?" but suddenly, his thoughts were interrupted by Yilin's voice.

"Uncle-Master Yu, this move of Big Brother Linghu's is not part of the Huashan Sword Art."

Yu Canghai turned around, his face an icy mask. "Sister, listen to the words of your respectful apprentice. What did she call this villain?"

“I have ears of my own and don’t need you to point things out to me!” Dingyi replied angrily.

She had heard Yilin referring to Linghu Chong as “Big Brother Linghu,” and was already angry about it. If Yu Canghai had spoken one moment later, she would have delivered a stern rebuke to Yilin, but since Yu Canghai spoke first, especially in such an impolite manner, she instead defended her apprentice.

“The words just slipped out of her mouth. What’s the big deal? Our Five Mountains sword schools are joined into one alliance; apprentices from any sword school of the Five Mountains are naturally fellow apprentices. What’s so strange about that?”

“Well! Well!” Yu Canghai laughed mockingly, as he gathered his inner strength from his lower abdomen, and then projected the energy from his left palm to push Lao Denuo away. Lao Denuo flew backwards and his back struck a wall. Dirt and debris dropped from the ceiling on impact.

“You think you are so innocent? Why have you been tailing me all this way? What are you up to?” Yu Canghai snapped.

After the shove and the impact, Lao Denuo felt as if his organs were turned upside down. He leaned against the wall and tried his best to not collapse. His knees were so weak that the only thing he wanted to do was to sit down on the floor. After hearing Yu Canghai’s words, he groaned inwardly. “So this crafty little crook was already aware that Little Apprentice Sister and I were spying on them.”

“Yilin, come with me. Tell me exactly how they seized you,” Dingyi said as she pulled Yilin by the hand and walked toward the door.

Everyone knew only too well if such a beautiful little nun fell into the hands of an evil rapist like Tian Boguang, it would be nearly impossible for her to maintain her virginity. The complete story, of course, would not be appropriate to be revealed in front of other people. Obviously Sister Dingyi was going to take her somewhere private and then ask about the details.

Swiftly, Yu Canghai rushed to the doorway and blocked their exit. “This

incident involves two lives. Little Sister Yilin, please stay right here to tell the story," he demanded. He paused a second and then continued, "Nephew apprentice Chi Baicheng was a member of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. In your alliance, all are fellow apprentices; maybe the Taishan Sword School does not really mind that Linghu Chong killed Chi, but my apprentice Luo Renjie did not have the honor of calling Linghu Chong an apprentice brother."

Dingyi was a very forceful woman; normally even her big senior sister Dingjing or the Head Master of Heng-Shan Sword School, senior sister Dingxian, would give way to her. How could she let Yu Canghai block her way with such impunity? Upon hearing these words, she raised her eyebrows immediately.

Liu Zhengfeng had long known of Sister Dingyi's hot-temper. When he saw Dingyi raise her eyebrows, he knew she was ready to strike. Yu Canghai and Dingyi were both first-class masters in the Martial World. If they started a fight, things would really get out of hand. So he rushed forward and bowed deeply.

"Both of you have given me great honor by being my respectful guests here at my ceremony. For the sake of that, please do not damage the spirit of that goodwill. It is my entire fault that I did not serve my guests well, I beg your pardon." He kept bowing to both Dingyi and Yu Canghai.

Sister Dingyi let out a dry smile. "Master Liu, you really have a good sense of humor. I am only angry at this bull-nose.[33] It has nothing to do with you. Because he doesn't allow me to leave, I leave to spite him. If he doesn't block my way, then it is possible for me to stay."

Yu Canghai had some degree of respect for Sister Dingyi's fighting skills, and didn't have total confidence in his ability to beat her in a fight. In addition, although her senior apprentice sister Dingxian had an amiable nature, it was well known that her Kung Fu skills were much greater. Even if he could win the fight today, her senior apprentice sister surely wouldn't let it go that easily. And once he offended the Heng-Shan Sword School, there would be no end of trouble. So he also forced a dry smile.

“All I want is for Little Sister Yilin to tell us the truth about what happened. Yu Canghai dare not block the Heng-Shan White-Cloud Nunnery Master’s way.” After saying these words, he moved back to his seat.

“It’s good you know that,” Sister Dingyi said. She held Yilin’s hand and walked back to her seat as well.

“What on earth happened after the day we lost you?” she asked Yilin. Afraid that since Yilin was young and inexperienced, she might say something that would disgrace both herself and the Heng-Shan Sword School, she hurriedly added, “Just tell the necessary parts. If it is irrelevant, we don’t need to know.”

“Yes, Master!” Yilin answered. “I haven’t done anything against the instructions from the senior masters. But Tian Boguang, the villain, he…he…he…!”

“I got it!” Dingyi nodded. “You don’t have to say another word now. I know everything. I will definitely slay the two villains, Tian Boguang and Linghu Chong, to assuage your anger…!”

Yilin looked at Dingyi in surprise with her crystal clear eyes. “Big Brother Linghu?” she uttered. “He…he….” Tears began to fall from her beautiful eyes. In a choking voice, she said, “He…he is already dead!”

Everyone in the room was stunned by the news.

Priest Tian-Men’s anger immediately vanished. “How did he die? Who killed him?” he asked in a loud voice.

“It was this…this Qingcheng…Qingcheng villain.” Yilin pointed at the body of Luo Renjie.

Yu Canghai could not help feeling proud. “So the scoundrel Linghu Chong was killed by Renjie and they ended in mutual annihilation!” he thought. “Good. Renjie my boy, I knew he had guts! He didn’t disgrace the fame of my Qingcheng Sword School.”

“So all members of your Five Mountains Sword Alliance are the good guys, and all people of my Qingcheng Sword School are bad guys?” he glared at Yilin

and sneered.

Tears kept falling from her eyes, Yilin said, "I…I don't know about that. I am not talking about you, Uncle-Master Yu. I am only talking about him." She pointed at Luo Renjie's body again.

"What are you scaring the child for?" Dingyi barked at Yu Canghai. "Yilin, don't be afraid. Tell us why he was a bad guy? Your Master is here, nobody will dare give you any trouble." She gave a glare back at Yu Canghai.

"Buddhists do not lie. Little Sister, are you willing to give a vow in the name of Buddha?" Yu Canghai demanded. He was afraid that Yilin would speak at Dingyi's instigation and describe Luo Renjie's behavior as intolerable. Since this apprentice of his had already perished along with Linghu Chong, there could be no other testimony; everybody would only have the statements from a single party.

"I dare not ever lie to my Master," Yilin said. She knelt down facing the outside, put her palms together, lowered her head and intoned, "Apprentice Yilin is reporting to her Master and the other Uncle-Masters. She dares not speak untruth. The Buddha has great powers and will verify her words."

Everyone could sense the sincerity in her words, so all became well disposed toward her. A scholarly, black-bearded, middle-aged man had been listening by the side quietly from the beginning. He interrupted Yilin and said, "The little Sister had already vowed. Of course we will believe her words."

"Did you hear that, bull-nose? Even Mr. Wen agrees. She will speak the truth," Dingyi said. She knew the man's surname was Wen, and everybody called him Mr. Wen, but she had no idea what his first name was. She only knew that he was from southern Shanxi Province and was famous for his Kung Fu with a pair of Judge's Pens. He was a master of acupoints.

Everyone's eyes turned to Yilin. Her glorious face brightened the entire room like a brilliant pearl or a piece of beautiful jade, with its purity and flawlessness. Even Yu Canghai thought to himself, "This little nun probably won't tell a lie." Silence befell the room while all waited for Yilin to start.

“Yesterday afternoon,” Yilin began, “I was following Master and my apprentice sisters, heading to the town of Hengyang. In the middle of the trip, it started to rain. As we went down the valley, I slipped. Although I managed to hang on to some rocks to break my fall, my hands were covered with mud and moss. So after we descended into the valley, I went to a stream to wash my hands. Suddenly, beside my shadow in the stream, appeared the shadow of a man. I was so startled that I stood up immediately. Then I felt a pain in my back – he had already sealed my acupoints. I was very scared and wanted to call my Master to come and help me, but it was already too late; because of the sealed acupoints, I could not utter a sound. The man picked me up and after walking about ten or twenty yards, put me inside a cave. I was scared to death, yet I couldn’t move an inch or make a sound. After quite a while, I heard the three senior apprentice sisters calling me in three different places, ‘Yilin, Yilin, where are you?’ That man just grinned and whispered to me, ‘If they come here, I’ll catch every one of them!’ The three apprentice sisters looked for me everywhere and then went off in different directions.

“After quite a while, hearing that my three apprentice sisters had gone far away, he released my acupoints. I immediately ran toward the opening of the cave, but this man moved a lot faster than I could, and had already blocked the way. So, I ended up running into his chest. That man burst into laughter. ‘You think you can run away?’ he said. I hurriedly jumped backwards, pulled out my long sword, and was ready to plunge it into him. But then I thought that since this man did not hurt me at all, and we Buddhists should always be merciful to others, there was no reason for me to hurt him. Killing is the first prohibition for Buddhists, so I didn’t thrust the sword.

“‘Why are you blocking my way?’ I asked. ‘If you don’t move aside, I’ll have to thrust and…cut you.’

“The man just grinned. He said, ‘Little Sister, you really have a kind heart. You just can’t bear to kill me, can you?’

“‘I don’t have any score to settle with you, why should I kill you?’ I said.

“‘That’s great! Why don’t we sit down and have a chat,’ he suggested.

“‘My Master and my apprentice sisters are looking for me. And anyway, my Master does not allow me to just speak with any man,’ I exclaimed.

“‘But you already have,’ he said, ‘so what’s the difference a couple of times more or less?’

“‘Move aside, don’t you know that my Master is very tough? If she had seen you behaving like this, she probably would have broken both your legs,’ I said.

“The man replied, ‘If you want to break my legs, go ahead. But your Master… she’s too old, I couldn’t stomach it….’”

“Nonsense! You even remembered all this rubbish?” Dingyi yelled.

Many people could not help laughing inwardly. But for the sake of Sister Dingyi, nobody dared let out a smile. All tried their best to keep looking serious.

“But he did say that,” Yilin insisted earnestly.

“Okay, okay, these types of words are not really related to the story that you are telling, so don’t mention them anymore. Just talk about how you met Linghu Chong of the Huashan Sword School,” Dingyi instructed.

“Yes, Master. The man kept talking, and just wouldn’t let me out, and said that I…I was very pretty, and wanted me to sleep….”

“Stop!” Dingyi yelled. “You kids don’t think before you speak. How can you talk about such things?”

“It was he who said that, I did not agree, and I did not sleep…,” Yilin tried to explain.

“Shut up!” Dingyi yelled even more loudly.

The Qingcheng apprentice who had carried the body of Luo Renjie in could not control himself anymore and let out a laugh. Dingyi was infuriated. She picked up a teacup from the table with a flourish, and flung the contents of the cup at him. She used the unique inner strength of the Heng-Shan Sword School when she flung the tea; it shot through the air quickly and accurately. The apprentice couldn’t move aside in time, and the hot liquid splashed squarely on

his face. He cried out loud from the burning pain.

"Your apprentice can talk about it, but my apprentice can't laugh at it? How unreasonable!" Yu Canghai complained angrily.

Sister Dingyi looked at Yu Canghai from the corner of her eyes. "Heng-Shan Dingyi has been unreasonable for many decades. Haven't you heard?" She held the empty teacup and was ready to throw it at Yu Canghai.

Yu Canghai didn't look at her, and even turned his body away from her.

Seeing Yu Canghai show so much confidence in himself, and knowing the good Kung Fu skills of the Qingcheng Master, Dingyi did not want to start any trouble. So she put the teacup down slowly and said to Yilin, "Go on with the story! Don't be so wordy with things that have nothing to do with the important facts."

"Yes, Master," said Yilin. "I tried to get out of the cave, but that man kept blocking my way and wouldn't let me pass. Seeing the sky becoming darker and darker, I was very worried and finally thrust my sword toward him. Master, I dare not violate the killing prohibition; I did not really want to kill him. I just wanted to scare him away. I used the move called 'Golden Pins Solve the Troubles,' but he extended his left arm and grabbed at my…my body. I was astounded, so I dodged to the side, and he snatched the sword right out of my hand. That man's Kung Fu skills were remarkable. He held the hilt of the sword with his right hand, and the tip of the sword using his thumb and index finger of his left hand. Then he just gently bent it, and with a crisp crack, the tip of the sword broke off about an inch."

"He broke off about an inch of the sword tip?" Dingyi repeated.

"Yes!" Yilin affirmed.

Dingyi and Priest Tian-Men looked at each other, both thinking the same thing: If Tian Boguang had only broken off the sword from the middle, it would be nothing special, but he broke an inch off the tip of the steel sword with just two fingers; the strength in his fingers must have been tremendous.

Priest Tian-Men drew a sword from an apprentice's waist, and also held the tip of the sword with the thumb and index finger of his left hand. He bent it slightly, and with a cracking sound, he broke about an inch off the tip. "Like this?" he asked.

"Yes," Yilin answered. "So Uncle-Master knows how to do it too!"

Priest Tian-Men gave a snort and shoved the broken sword back in the apprentice's sheath. He struck the table with his left hand; the inch of broken sword tip sunk into the table like an inlay.

"Uncle-Master, you really have marvelous skills. I guess the villain Tian Boguang probably doesn't know how to do that," Yilin said cheerfully. But then, her face turned pale and she lowered her head. With a gentle sigh, she said, "Alas, but Uncle-Master, you weren't there at the time, otherwise, Big Brother Linghu wouldn't have been wounded so badly."

"What do you mean wounded badly? Didn't you say that he was already dead?" Priest Tian-Men asked.

"That's right, if Big Brother Linghu wasn't wounded so badly, he wouldn't have been murdered by the Qingcheng villain Luo Renjie," Yilin said remorsefully.

Hearing her associating the word "villain" with Tian Boguang while also calling his apprentice a "villain", which put the apprentice of Qingcheng on the same level as the notorious rapist, Yu Canghai could not help letting out another grunt.

Seeing tears welling up in Yilin's pretty eyes, and that she was on the verge of tears, no one wanted to ask her further regarding Linghu Chong's fate. Priest Tian-Men, Liu Zhengfeng, Mr. Wen, and He Sanqi all couldn't help but feel sympathy for her, and would have patted her on her back or head to comfort her if she weren't a nun.

Yilin wiped her tears with her sleeves and continued with the story in a sobbing voice, "The villain Tian Boguang was pushing me around and began to tear at my clothes. I tried to hit him with my hands, but he caught both of them.

“Right at that moment, somebody suddenly began to laugh loudly. ‘Ha, ha, ha,’ he laughed three times, and then after a short pause, another three times.

“‘Who is that?’ Tian Boguang asked in a stern voice.

“The man outside just kept laughing.

“‘You’d better get lost fast,’ Tian Boguang warned him. ‘Making Mister Tian angry might cost you your life!’

“The man answered with another three laughs. Tian Boguang tried to ignore him and continued to tear off my clothes while the man outside just laughed again and again. Every time the man laughed, Tian Boguang got a bit angrier. I really hoped that the man would come to rescue me, but he knew how tough Tian Boguang was and dared not come into the cave, and just kept on laughing outside.

“Tian Boguang began to pour out streams of abuse. He sealed my acupoints again and rushed out of the cave, but the man had already hidden himself. After a while, Tian Boguang still could not find him, so he came back into the cave again. As soon as he was about to reach me, the man outside the cave began laughing again. I thought it was quite interesting and could not help laughing myself.”

Sister Dingyi gave her a hard stare and remonstrated, “You were at the moment between life and death, and you still found the time to laugh?”

Yilin’s face turned a little bit red. “True. I knew I shouldn’t have laughed, but at that moment, I don’t know why, I just did. Tian Boguang lowered his body and crept back to the opening of the cave, ready to rush out if the man outside gave out another laugh. But the man was quite alert, and didn’t make a sound. Tian Boguang walked slowly toward the opening step by step. I figured it would be really bad if the man were to get caught, so when I saw that Tian Boguang was about to rush out, I shouted, ‘Look out, he is coming out!’

“The man laughed three times from a distance and said, ‘Thanks a lot, but he won’t be able to keep up with me. His Qing-Gong skills are not too good.’”

Everyone couldn't help thinking, "Tian Boguang's nickname is 'Ten Thousand Miles Loner.' He enjoys great fame in the Martial World with his outstanding Qing-Gong skills. Now someone comes along and says 'his Qing-Gong skills are not too good,' he must have intentionally said it to irritate Tian Boguang."

Yilin continued, "The villain Tian Boguang suddenly turned around and gave my face a hard pinch. I screamed in pain. Then he ran out of the cave and shouted, 'Damn punk, let's see whose Qing-Gong is better.' But he was tricked. The man had been hiding by the opening of the cave, and as soon as Tian Boguang rushed out, he sneaked in.

"'Don't worry. I am here to save you. Which of your acupoints were sealed?' he whispered to me.

"'My right shoulder and my back," I said. 'It seems to be the Jian-Zhen Acupoint and Da-Zhui Acupoint! Who are you?'

"'Let me open up your sealed acupoints first,' he said, then started massaging at my Jian-Zhen and Da-Zhui Acupoints.

"Perhaps I didn't tell him the right acupoints; although he tried very hard, he still couldn't release my acupoints. We heard Tian Boguang's shouting coming back toward us, so I said, 'You'd better run away quickly. If he sees you when he comes back, he will kill you.'

"He replied, 'Five Mountains Sword Alliance; the same root, different branches. When an apprentice sister is in trouble, how can I not try to help?'"

"Does he belong to the Five Mountains Sword Alliance?" Dingyi asked.

"Master, he is Linghu Chong, Big Brother Linghu."

Dingyi, Priest Tian-Men, Yu Canghai, He Sanqi, Mr. Wen, and Liu Zhengfeng all said "oh" and nodded. Lao Denuo let out a long breath. Some people had already thought that this man might be Linghu Chong, but no one was very sure until Yilin confirmed it.

Yilin went on with the story, "Hearing Tian Boguang's shouting getting closer and closer, Big Brother Linghu said, 'Pardon me!' Then he carried me out of the

cave and hid inside the high grass. Right after we hid ourselves, Tian Boguang ran into the cave. He could not find me and became really angry, so he began swearing and saying lots of bad words. I didn't quite understand what he was saying. He picked up my broken sword and started slashing wildly at the high grass. Luckily it was raining that night, and there was no light from either the moon or the stars, so he could not see us. But he figured that we could not have gone far, and must have been somewhere nearby, so he kept chopping and slashing. Once the sword was so close to me that it went only a few inches above my head.

"He chopped and swore, and walked around randomly. I suddenly felt some warm drops of liquid fall on my face, and at the same time, I smelled blood. I was quite startled and asked in whisper, 'Are you wounded?' Big Brother Linghu covered my mouth with his hand. After a long while, when we heard the sound of chopping grass going further and further away, he whispered back, 'No problem,' and then took his hand away from my mouth. But the warm blood just kept dripping onto my face.

"'You are badly wounded; we've got to stop the bleeding,' I said. 'I have Heavenly Connecting Glue.'

"'Don't speak,' he ordered. 'He'll find out where we are if we move!' and then he covered his wound with his hand.

"After a while, Tian Boguang ran back. 'Ha-ha, so here you are. I can see you. Stand up!' he shouted.

"Hearing his words, I could only groan inwardly. I was ready to stand up, but I simply could not move my legs…."

"You were tricked. Tian Boguang was trying to fool you. He didn't see you at all," Sister Dingyi cried.

"That's right. Master, how did you know? You weren't there at that time!" Yilin asked in surprise.

"Was that so hard to guess?" Dingyi explained. "If he had really seen you, he would have come over and killed Linghu Chong with a single chop. Why bother

shouting out loud? So the lad Linghu Chong was naive too.”

Yilin shook her head. “No, Big Brother Linghu thought of that as well. He immediately covered my mouth with his hand, afraid that I would scream. Tian Boguang shouted for a while and did not hear any response, so he went about slashing some more grass. Big Brother Linghu waited until Tian Boguang went far away, then he whispered to me, ‘Apprentice sister, if we can last another half an hour, when the blood and energy flows better around your sealed acupoints, I will be able to open them up. But since Tian Boguang will definitely turn back, we might not be so lucky again. I’d say let’s just take our chances and hide inside the cave.’”

At these words, Mr. Wen, He Sanqi, and Liu Zhengfeng all clapped their hands. “Excellent! Brave, yet smart!” Mr. Wen praised.

Yilin went on, “I was scared to go back to the cave, but I already had great confidence in and admiration for Big Brother Linghu. If he said so, then it must be a good idea. So I said, ‘Okay.’ He picked me up again and rushed into the cave.

“After he put me down on the ground, I said, ‘I have Heavenly Connecting Glue in my pocket. It is a miraculous medicine for sealing wounds. Please… please take it out and use it on your wounds.’

“‘It’s not a good time to take it out,’ he objected. ‘I’ll wait till you can move your hands and legs again, then you can give it to me.’ He drew his sword and cut off a section of his sleeve to wrap the wound on his left shoulder.

“I finally understood that when we were hiding in the grass, in order to protect me, when Tian Boguang cut his shoulder, he didn’t move at all and didn’t let out any sound, and in the darkness, Tian Boguang didn’t notice it. I felt so sorry for him and didn’t know why it was not a good time to take the medicine out….”

“So as you have said, Linghu Chong is actually a gentleman?” Dingyi let out a snort.

Yilin looked at her Master, her bright eyes filled with surprise. “Of course, Big Brother Linghu is a first-class gentleman. I didn’t even know him, and he stood

up and rescued me, risking his own life," she said.

Yu Canghai said coldly, "You did not know him, but he probably had seen you before. Otherwise, how could he have such a 'kind' heart?" He was implying that Linghu Chong acted bravely because of her extreme beauty.

"No! He said he had never met me before. Big Brother Linghu never lies to me; he never does!" Yilin rebutted. These words were spoken with such assurance, that although her voice was still gentle, the meaning was very resolute and decisive. All the people in the hall were moved by her pure confidence and all truly believed her.

Yu Canghai thought, "That rascal Linghu Chong was always reckless in a crazy way; if he didn't act so fearlessly for beauty, then it must have been for fame. He wanted to gain fame by fighting Tian Boguang."

Yilin continued, "After wrapping his wound, Big Brother Linghu continued massaging the acupoints on my shoulder and back. Soon we heard the chopping and slashing noises coming closer and closer. Tian Boguang had slashed his way to the opening of the cave. My heart was thumping very hard.

"Tian Boguang came into the cave and sat down on the ground silently. I held my breath and didn't even dare to breath. Suddenly, a great pain came from my shoulder. It came so unexpected that I couldn't help groaning. That spoiled the whole thing. Tian Boguang laughed loudly and walked toward me with big steps. Big Brother Linghu just squatted by the side and did not move.

"'Little lamb, so you are still hiding in the cave, huh!' Tian Boguang said with a smile. He stuck his hand out to grab me.

"I heard the sound of a sword thrust, and then I found that Big Brother Linghu had stabbed Tian Boguang. Tian Boguang was startled and dropped the broken sword. But the thrust didn't hit his vital parts. What a pity! Tian Boguang jumped back in a hurry, pulled out the knife by his waist, and began to swing it at Big Brother Linghu. The knife and the sword hit each other with a clang; the two started fighting. In the dark, neither of them could see. After a couple of clangs, both of them jumped backward. All I could hear was the sound of their

breathing. I was scared to death."

"How many rounds did Linghu Chong fight him?" Priest Tian-Men interrupted.

"I was scared senseless at the time, and didn't notice how long they had fought," Yilin answered. "I heard Tian Boguang laughing and saying, 'Ha, you are from the Huashan Sword School! The Huashan Sword Art is no match for my skills. What's your name?'

"Big Brother Linghu said, 'Five Mountains Sword Alliance; same root different branches. Either Huashan Sword School or Heng-Shan Sword School, we are all after you, evil rapist….' Before he could finish his words, Tian Boguang had already started his attack. It turned out that he tricked Big Brother Linghu into talking in order to find out where he was. After several more rounds, Big Brother Linghu let out a cry of pain. He was wounded again.

"Tian Boguang laughed. 'I told you. Huashan Sword Art is no match for my skills. Even if your old Master Yue had come himself, he'd lose too.' But Big Brother Linghu did not answer him again.

"Earlier, when I had a great pain on my shoulder, it turned out it was because the acupoints on my shoulder opened up by themselves. I felt some more pain on my back; those acupoints were opening up too. I slowly struggled up while moving my hands around looking for the broken sword. Big Brother Linghu heard the sound and said happily, 'Your acupoints are open now! Run away! Hurry up!'

"'Apprentice brother of the Huashan Sword School, let's fight the villain together!' I declared.

"'You run away! Hurry up! We will still be no match for him even if we fight together,' he demanded.

"Tian Boguang laughed. 'Glad you know that! Why waste your life for no reason? Hey, I really like your courage. What's your name?'

"'If you had asked for my respectful name nicely, I would tell you, but since

you asked your old man so rudely, he won't pay any heed to you,' Big Brother Linghu answered.

"Master, don't you think that was funny? Big Brother Linghu wasn't his father, but called himself his 'old man'."

"That was just a rude word; it doesn't really mean 'his old man'!" Dingyi let out a disgruntled snort as she explained.

"Ah, I see. Big Brother Linghu then said, 'Apprentice sister, you can run to the town of Hengshan. We have lots of friends there; I am sure this villain wouldn't dare to go there looking for you.'

"'What if he kills you?' I asked.

"'He is not good enough to kill me!' Big Brother Linghu yelled. 'I will tie him up here. Why are you still here? Run! Ouch!' With two metallic sounds made by their weapons hitting each other, Big Brother Linghu was wounded once more.

"He got mad and started yelling at me, 'If you don't leave right now, I am going to start cursing you!'

"By then I had already found the broken sword on the ground, so I shouted, 'Let's fight him two to one.'

"'Nothing could be better! Tian Boguang, one man and one knife, here to fight both the Huashan Sword School and the Heng-Shan Sword School,' Tian Boguang laughed loudly.

"Big Brother Linghu started to scold me. He yelled, 'You foolish little nun, you are an idiot. Go away! If you don't go away, next time I see you, I'll slap you!'

"Tian Boguang laughed. 'This little nun doesn't want to part with me. She won't go.'

"Big Brother Linghu got really mad. He shouted, 'Are you leaving or not?'

"I said, 'No way!'

"Big Brother Linghu then said, 'If you don't leave now, I am going to call your Master names! Dingxian you idiotic old nun, look how you've taught such an

idiotic little nun!’

“‘Uncle-Master Dingxian is not my Master,’ I explained.

“‘Fine, then I’ll call Sister Dingjing names!’ he said.

“‘Uncle-Master Dingjing is not my Master, either,’ I said.

“‘Bah! You’re still not leaving! I’ll call Dingyi an old idiot…!’”

Dingyi made a sour face and looked very displeased.

“Master, please don’t be angry,” Yilin said hurriedly. “Big Brother Linghu meant well for me. He didn’t really want to call you anything.

“I said, ‘I am foolish by myself. It wasn’t taught by my Master!’

“Suddenly, Tian Boguang jumped forth at me and poked his finger at me. I waved my sword wildly in the darkness and forced him back.

“Big Brother Linghu shouted, ‘I have a whole bunch of dirty words that I am going to use on your Master now. Aren’t you afraid?’

“‘Don’t call anyone any more names. Let’s run away together!’ I said.

“‘Your standing beside me is already blocking my moves,’ Big Brother Linghu shouted. ‘I can’t use my best Huashan sword moves. Once you get out, then I can kill this villain with ease.’

“Tian Boguang laughed hard and said, ‘You’ve really got some affection for this little nun, too bad that she doesn’t even know your name.’

“I thought these words from the villain were quite right, so I asked, ‘Apprentice brother of the Huashan Sword School, what’s your name? I will tell my Master when I go to Hengshan that you saved my life.’

“Big Brother Linghu said, ‘Go away! Hurry up! You are too wordy! My name is Lao, Lao Denuo!’”

Hearing his own name mentioned, Lao Denuo was stunned. “Why did Big Apprentice Brother assume my identity?” he thought to himself, feeling utterly confused.

“This Linghu Chong does kind things and walks away from the fame. That is the true characteristic of us chivalrous people,” Mr. Wen nodded and murmured to himself.

Sister Dingyi glanced at Lao Denuo and murmured, “This Linghu Chong was so rude, and even dared call me names. He was probably afraid that I would go after him because of that, so he wanted to pin the blame on somebody else.”

“Hey, so you’re the one who called me an old idiot?” she glared at Lao Denuo.

Lao Denuo bowed hurriedly. “No, no! I dare not!”

“Sister Dingyi,” Liu Zhengfeng cut in with a smile, “Linghu Chong had his reasons for using his apprentice brother Lao Denuo’s name. This nephew apprentice Lao joined Huashan Sword School with previously learned skills. Although his seniority is low, his age is not. With a great bush of a beard, he could pass of as Yilin’s grandfather.”

Dingyi immediately understood that Linghu Chong only wanted to protect Yilin’s reputation. At that time, it was totally dark in the cave; no one could recognize anyone else, even when face-to-face. If Yilin got away and mentioned that it was Lao Denuo of Huashan Sword School who saved her, no one would think up snide comments to defame her with such an old man. This not only protected Yilin’s reputation, but also protected the reputation of the Heng-Shan Sword School. At this thought, she could not help letting a little smile creep into her face.

“This lad really is thoughtful.” She nodded. “Yilin, what happened after that?”

Yilin answered, “By then I still didn’t want to leave. I said, ‘Big brother Lao, you got yourself into danger all because of me, how can I leave you in danger? If my Master learned that I was such a coward and didn’t care about fellow apprentices, she would kill me herself. Master always taught us that although we are all females in the Heng-Shan Sword School, with regard to chivalry, we are never bettered by any man!’”

“Excellent, excellent! You said it right!” Dingyi applauded and shouted out. “For us Kung Fu practitioners, whoever does not exercise chivalry is better dead

than alive. No matter whether man or woman, it's all the same."

Seeing the solemn expression on her face when she said these words, everyone could see that the spirit of the old nun was really no less than that of any man.

Yilin continued, "But then Big Brother Linghu began to scold me profusely. 'You darn idiotic little nun,' he said, 'all you do is talk and talk and talk, and stop me from being able to use my unbeatable Huashan Sword Art. My old life is destined to be lost in Tian Boguang's hands. So you're in league with Tian Boguang and purposely set me up. I, Lao Denuo, am so unlucky today, seeing a nun right after I start my trip. And it is a rotten little nun that will have no son, no grandson, no nothing. Even with the super strong and super powerful magical sword arts I know, I am unable to use them, because I fear that the energy of my sword strikes would hurt the little nun's life. Alright! Very well! Tian Boguang, just give me a good chop and let's finish it off. This old man is just fated to go today!'"

All of Linghu Chong's dirty words told in Yilin's sweet and gentle voice brought inadvertent smiles of amusement to the lips of the listeners.

Then Yilin said, "After hearing these words, I realized I couldn't do him any good because my Kung Fu skills were so poor, and my staying in the cave would block his way and prevent him from using his magical Huashan Sword Art…."

"He was just bragging! His Huashan Sword Art is just average. What makes it so invincible in the Martial World?" Dingyi snorted.

"Master, he was just trying to scare off Tian Boguang," Yilin said. "Hearing more and more abuses coming out of his mouth, I said unwillingly, 'Big brother Lao, I am leaving! Hope to see you later!'

"'Get lost you smelly rotten duck egg,' he scolded. 'The further you get lost, the better! 'Once a man sees a nun, he loses all his bets!' I didn't see you before, and I will never see you again. Gambling is my favorite hobby; why would I ever want to see you again?'"

Hearing this, Dingyi could not contain her anger. She stood up and yelled in a stern voice, “That scum! Did you leave?”

“I was afraid to make him even angrier, so I left,” Yilin said. “Once I stepped out of the cave, I heard the clash of weapons getting more and more intense. I figured that if the villain Tian Boguang won, he would be after me again. If ‘big brother Lao’ won, after he came out and saw me outside of the cave, he would ‘lose all his bets’ because of me, so I clenched my teeth and ran as fast as I could to catch up with you, respectful Master. Then I could ask you to help fight the villain Tian Boguang.”

Dingyi hummed and nodded.

“Master, Big Brother Linghu later lost his life; was that because of…of seeing me, and getting bad luck?” Yilin suddenly asked out of the blue.

“Drop that ‘once a man sees a nun, he loses all his bets’ nonsense!” Dingyi said angrily. “How could you have believed that? There are so many people here that have seen us, do all of them have bad luck now?”

People in the hall bit their lips to keep from commenting on her question.

“Yes, Master,” Yilin answered. “I ran till dawn and saw the town gate of Hengyang in the horizon. I calmed down a little and thought that I could probably find Master in Hengyang. But who’d expected that right at that moment, Tian Boguang caught up with me. As soon as I saw him my legs went weak, and just after several steps, he caught me again. I thought that since he had chased me here, big brother Lao must have been murdered in the cave. I felt indescribable sadness.

“With so many people on the streets, Tian Boguang didn’t dare be rude to me. He just said, ‘If you follow me without making any trouble, I won’t do anything bad to you. If you don’t listen to me, then I will tear off your clothes right away and let all these people on the streets laugh at you.’

“I was very scared and dared not fight back, so I just followed him into the town. When we arrived at the Huiyan Wine House, he said, ‘Little Sister, you have the type of natural beauty that will attract…attract even the wild geese to

land. This Huiyan Wine House must have been opened just for you.[34] Let's go in and have a drink and some fun.'

"I said, 'We Buddhists don't eat flesh or drink alcohol. This is the rule of our White-Cloud Nunnery.'

"He said, 'I am sure you have lots of rules in your White-Cloud Nunnery. Are you really going to follow all of them? Later I will teach you how to break some more rules. Rules and regulations are all bogus. Your Master…your Master….'" At these words, she gave Dingyi a sneaky glance and dared not to continue.

"You don't need to mention the nonsense this villain spouted. Just say what happened next," Dingyi instructed.

Yilin answered, "Yes, Master. Then I said, 'You are talking nonsense, my Master would never hide in secret places to drink wine and eat dog meat.'"

The people in the hall simply could not help but laugh. Yilin did not repeat the words of Tian Boguang, yet from her own words, everyone knew what Tian Boguang must have said about Dingyi.

Dingyi made a sour face and thought, "This child is too honest. She doesn't know what to say and what not to."

Yilin continued, "The villain grabbed my collar and threatened, 'If you don't go up to the wine house and drink with me, I'll tear your clothes off.'

"I had no choice but to go up to the wine house with him. The villain ordered some wine and dishes. He was really mean. I told him that I couldn't eat flesh, yet he intentionally ordered dishes of beef, pork, poultry, and fish. He threatened that if I didn't eat, he would tear off my clothes. Master, I simply refused to eat those dishes. Buddhists are restricted from eating flesh. I couldn't violate the prohibition. If the villain wanted to tear off my clothes because of that, then fine, but it wouldn't be my fault.

"Right at that moment, a man walked up to the wine house. He had a sword hanging by his waist; his face was pale and his clothes were bloodstained. He sat at our table in silence, picked up the bowl of wine in front of me and poured all

of it down his throat in a single gulp. He poured himself another bowl of wine and raised the bowl toward Tian Boguang. 'Please!' he said. He turned to me and said, 'Please!' Then he drank that bowl as well.

"As soon as I heard his voice, I felt very surprised and very happy. It turned out he was 'big brother Lao' who had saved me in the cave. Thank Buddha! He escaped from Tian Boguang's murdering hands, but he had bloodstains all over him. In order to rescue me, he had been really badly wounded!

"Tian Boguang looked at him from head to toe and back again. 'It's you!'

"'It's me!' he replied.

"Tian Boguang raised his thumb to him and praised him, 'Good man!'

"He raised his thumb and replied, 'Good knife skills!'

"The two both began to laugh loudly and drink bowls of wine at the same time. I was quite surprised: They had fought so fiercely last night, why have they suddenly become friends now? I was very pleased to know that this man did not die, but since he was a friend of Tian Boguang, the villain, I became worried again.

"'You are not Lao Denuo!' Tian Boguang protested. 'Lao Denuo is a dried up old geezer. He can't be as young and carefree as you.'

"I sneaked a glance at him. He was only in his twenties, so last night when he said 'This old man has lived such a long life,' he was really fooling Tian Boguang.

"'I am not Lao Denuo,' the man admitted with a smile.

"Tian Boguang struck the table with his palm. 'Yeah, you are Huashan Linghu Chong. You're a somebody in the Martial World.'

"Big Brother Linghu admitted again. 'You really flatter me! Linghu Chong is only your defeated opponent. This is very embarrassing!' he said.

"'No fight, no acquaintance!' Tian Boguang grinned. 'Why don't we be friends? If brother Linghu likes this pretty little nun, I'll just let you have her. I

am not the kind who values chicks above friendship.’”

Dingyi’s face turned dark, but she only murmured, “That evil rapist, that evil rapist…!”

Yilin almost began to cry again. “Master, Big Brother Linghu suddenly started scolding me again. ‘This little nun has no color in her face,’ he said. ‘All she eats everyday are vegetables and bean curds; her face can’t look that good. Brother Tian, I get real riled when I see nuns. I really wish I could exterminate all the nuns in the world!’

“‘Why?’ Tian Boguang asked while laughing.

“‘To tell you the truth, I have a small hobby – gambling,’ Big Brother Linghu said. ‘Gambling is my life. Every time I see some dice, I’d forget my own name. But as soon as I see a nun, I can just forget about gambling for the rest of the day. No matter what I bet or gamble on, I will assuredly lose. This happens every single time. And it happens not only to me, but also to all my fellow apprentices of the Huashan Sword School. So every time when we, apprentices of the Huashan Sword School, see Uncle-Masters and apprentice sisters from the Heng-Shan Sword School, although everyone looks very respectful on the outside, we all curse our bad luck inside!’”

Dingyi simply could not stand this anymore; she turned her hand and gave Lao Denuo a resounding slap on the face. The move was fast and accurate. Lao Denuo had no chance of dodging it. He just felt great dizziness, and almost fell to the ground.

Chapter 4: Seat-Fighting

Translated by Lanny Lin



Linghu Chong laughed loudly. “Little nun,” he said, “Do you want me to win or lose?” “Of course I want you to win,” Yilin said, “When you fight while sitting down, you are the second best in the world, you won’t lose to him.” “Good!” Linghu Chong said. “Then please go! The quicker the better, the further the merrier!”

“Sister,” Liu Zhengfeng said, smiling politely, “there’s really no need to be so angry. Nephew apprentice Linghu only said that nonsense to Tian Boguang in order to rescue your brilliant little apprentice. Do you actually believe he meant

what he said?”

“You mean he said all that in order to rescue Yilin?” Dingyi was surprised.

“That is my belief.” Liu Zhengfeng nodded. “Nephew apprentice Yilin, what do you think?”

“Big Brother Linghu was a good person, only…only a little bit without manners when he spoke. But Master, if you are going to be angry, I dare not continue!” Yilin lowered her head.

“Tell me everything! Tell everything without omitting any details. I want to know what on earth he was thinking, good or evil! If this fellow was really a rascal, then even though he’s dead, I will make old man Yue pay for it!” Dingyi yelled.

Yilin murmured a few words, but was too afraid to continue.

“Keep talking! Don’t be so concerned about him. Are you afraid that we won’t be able to distinguish between what’s good and what’s evil?” Dingyi demanded.

“Yes, Master!” Yilin said.

“‘Brother Tian,’ Big Brother Linghu said, ‘we are people of the Martial World – we live our lives on the sword’s edge. Someone with better-developed skills does possess certain advantages, but eventually, we all have to count on our luck. Don’t you agree? When facing someone that has about the same level of fighting skills, life and death depends entirely on luck. This little nun is as scrawny as a chicken that weighs no more than three pounds. Even if she were as pretty as a goddess from heaven, I still wouldn’t have anything to do with her. Life is definitely much more important. Putting women before friendship is wrong! Putting women before life is just plain stupid. It’s to everyone’s best interest that no one touches this little nun at all.’

“‘Brother Linghu,’ Tian Boguang sneered, ‘I thought you are a man that feared nothing. Why are you so superstitious about nuns?’

“‘Hey,’ Big Brother Linghu exclaimed, ‘I have really bad luck every time I see a nun. It’s quite consistent. I simply can’t ignore that fact. For example, I was

perfectly fit last night before I met this little nun. Then, without even seeing her face, just by hearing her voice, I ended up with three stab wounds from you, which almost cost me my life. If this isn't bad luck, then what is?'

"'That's right!' Tian Boguang burst into loud laughter.

"Big Brother Linghu then said, 'Brother Tian, I don't speak with nuns. Why don't you just let the little nun get lost, so we can enjoy our drinks in peace? Trust me! I am giving you valuable advice. Even one touch of that little nun will bring you incredibly bad luck, and when you wander about the Martial World, trouble will follow you everywhere, unless you become a monk yourself. How can you risk the Three Venoms of the World?'

"'What are the Three Venoms of the World?' Tian Boguang asked curiously.

"Big Brother Linghu put on a very surprised face. 'Brother Tian,' he said, 'you have been to many places in the Martial World and experienced many things. How can you not know of the 'Three Venoms of the World?' It is indeed well said: Nuns, arsenic and golden striped snakes, do not touch for heaven's sake! Nun is the first venom, arsenic is another, and golden striped snake is the third. And if you notice, among these three, nun is ranked number one. These words are common knowledge to the male apprentices in our Five Mountains Sword Alliance.'"

Dingyi's anger erupted like a volcano. She struck the table with her palm so heavily that it almost collapsed. "What a damn load of…," she swore loudly. At the last moment, she managed to control herself and did not spit out the dirty word.

Lao Denuo, who had already learned his lesson, was keeping his distance from her. Seeing her angry red face, he instantly took another step back.

Liu Zhengfeng sighed. "Nephew apprentice Linghu had good intentions, but he may have gone a bit too far making up so much nonsense. But let's look at it another way: when one talks with a villain like Tian Boguang, if he doesn't speak with conviction, it can't be easy to trick him."

"Uncle-Master Liu, are you saying that Big Brother Linghu made everything up

to fool Tian Boguang?" Yilin asked.

"Of course!" answered Liu Zhengfeng. "How could we have such silly and rude sayings in our Five Mountains Sword Alliance? Tomorrow, it will be time for my hand-washing ceremony. I definitely want to have good luck. If anyone had any prejudice with regard to your respectful school, why would Sister Dingyi and all these nephew apprentices be so courteously invited to my house?"

Hearing these words, Dingyi was slightly mollified. She acknowledged with a slight snort but complained, "What a foul mouth this Linghu Chong has! I wonder what scoundrel taught him his manners." Obviously, the hidden meaning behind her comment was that she felt that Linghu Chong's Master, the Head Master of Huashan Sword School, was also to blame for his student's actions.

"Sister, please don't be angry," Liu Zhengfeng said. "That Tian Boguang has some top-notch Kung Fu skills. Nephew apprentice Linghu could not hope to beat him in a fight, and seeing that nephew apprentice Yilin was in great danger, he had to make something up in the hope that the villain would let her go. Just think, Tian Boguang has been to many places in the Martial World and has experienced many things. It is not easy to fool him. Now, there are certainly some stupid people who are prejudiced against nuns; so nephew apprentice Linghu just used this as his hook. We live in this Martial World, and sometimes we have to do what is expedient. If nephew apprentice Linghu did not respect the Heng-Shan Sword School, if people of the Huashan Sword School, including Mr. Yue, did not sincerely respect the three senior Sisters, why would he try so hard to rescue an apprentice of the Heng-Shan Sword School?"

"Thank you for the kind words." Dingyi nodded. "So did Tian Boguang let you go because of that?" she turned back to Yilin.

"No," Yilin shook her head.

"Big Brother Linghu then said, 'Brother Tian, your Qing-Gong is the best in the world, but if you are cursed, you can never outrun your bad luck, no matter

how good your Qing-Gong is.'

"Tian Boguang seemed a little tentative. He glanced at me, and then shook his head. 'I come alone and leave alone, going where I please. Why get so worked up? Since we have already seen this little nun, why not just let her stay here and accompany us?'

"Right in that instant, a young man from the next table suddenly drew his sword and rushed in front of Tian Boguang. 'Are you…are you Tian Boguang?' he yelled.

"'I am. And?' Tian Boguang answered.

"'You evil rapist,' the young man exclaimed, 'I'm going to kill you! Everyone in the Martial World wants you dead, yet here you are, bold as can be. You must be longing for death!' He thrust his sword at Tian Boguang. The moves he used were from the Taishan Sword School sword art style. And that was him, the apprentice brother." She pointed at the corpse on the door plank.

"Chi Baicheng, what a good lad! Very good!" Priest Tian-Men nodded.

Yilin went on with the story.

"Tian Boguang made a slight movement of his body and a knife suddenly appeared in his hand. 'Sit down. Sit down. Drink wine. Drink!' he said with a smile. Then he put his knife back into its sheath.

"No one knew exactly how it happened, but the apprentice brother of the Taishan Sword School had been slashed across the chest. Blood gushed from the knife wound. He stared at Tian Boguang, stumbled a little, and then fell down on the floor."

She turned and glanced at Priest Tian-Song. "That Uncle-Master of the Taishan Sword School immediately rushed forward to confront Tian Boguang, and started a vigorous attack. The moves that Uncle-Master used were very good, but Tian Boguang remained seated and simply blocked them with his knife. That Uncle-Master attacked with over thirty moves, and Tian Boguang blocked every one of them while sitting down; he did not even bother to stand up."

Priest Tian-Men's face turned dark. He looked at the apprentice brother lying on the door plank.

"Junior apprentice brother, was that villain's Kung Fu really this good?" he asked.

Priest Tian-Song gave a long sigh and turned his head away slowly.

Yilin continued, "Then Big Brother Linghu drew his sword and thrust it at Tian Boguang as well. Tian Boguang blocked the thrust with his knife and stood up."

"That cannot be right!" Dingyi cut her off. "Priest Tian-Song attacked with over thirty moves, yet Tian Boguang did not stand up. Why did he stand up when Linghu Chong only attacked once? How could Linghu Chong's Kung Fu be better than Priest Tian-Song's?"

"Tian Boguang had his reasons," Yilin explained. "'Brother Linghu,' Tian Boguang said, 'I look upon you as a friend. When you attack me, if I remain seated, it would be disrespectful. Although my Kung Fu skills are better than yours, I respect your personality, so no matter who wins the fight, I have to stand up to fight. But for that bull…bull-nose…well, it's a different story.'

"'Hmm,' Big Brother Linghu said, 'thank you for the courtesy. You are giving me too much praise.' Then he attacked with three continuous thrusts. Master, the three thrusts were so swift and fierce, the flash of the sword covered Tian Boguang's entire upper body…."

"That is one of old man Yue's valued moves called something like 'Three Peaks of Mount Huashan'." Dingyi nodded. "It is said that the second thrust is fiercer than the first one, and the third one is even fiercer than the second one. So how did Tian Boguang fend that off?"

"Tian Boguang blocked one thrust and took a step back, blocked another thrust and took another step, so he stepped back a total of three paces. 'Nice moves!' he cheered, and then turned to Uncle-Master Tian-Song. 'Hey, bull-nose! Why didn't you join him and attack me together?' Right after Big Brother Linghu began the first thrust, Uncle-Master Tian-Song stepped back and just

stood by the side, watching.

“‘I am a gentleman of honor from the Taishan Sword School. Why would I humiliate myself by fighting side by side with such an evil rapist?’ Uncle-Master replied coldly.

“‘Don’t be mistaken about apprentice brother Linghu,’ I could not help saying, ‘he is a good person!’

“‘He is a good person? Ha-ha, he is a wonderful person that commits evil deeds with Tian Boguang!’ Uncle-Master Tian-Song sneered.

“Suddenly, Uncle-Master Tian-Song uttered a loud cry and then pressed his hands to his chest with a great look of disbelief on his face. Tian Boguang returned his knife to its sheath. ‘Sit down. Sit down! Drink wine! Drink!’ he said.

“Seeing blood seeping through Uncle-Master Tian-Song’s fingers, I had no idea what kind of magic knife move Tian Boguang had just used. I didn’t even see him moving his arm or swinging his knife, and Uncle-Master Tian-Song had already been wounded in the chest. The thrust must have been executed with extreme speed. I was so scared, I started screaming, ‘Don’t…don’t kill him!’

“Tian Boguang grinned, ‘The little beauty says no killing, I won’t kill you then!’ he said.

“Uncle-Master Tian-Song covered his wound with his hands and rushed down the stairs. Big Brother Linghu was about to run after him and help, but Tian Boguang grabbed him. ‘Brother Linghu,’ he said, ‘this bull-nose is too arrogant. He would rather die than ask for your help. Why go asking for trouble?’ Big Brother Linghu shook his head, let out a wry smile, and poured two full bowls of wine down his throat.

“Master, I was thinking, we Buddhists have five primary prohibitions, and the fifth one is the prohibition against alcohol. Although Big Brother Linghu was no Buddhist, it was still not good to drink wine nonstop like that. But I dared not say a thing to him, afraid that he was going to scold me and say something like ‘Once one sees a nun….’”

“Those insane words of Linghu Chong should never be mentioned again,” Dingyi admonished.

“Yes, Master!” Yilin answered.

“What happened after that?” Dingyi asked.

“‘That bull-nose’s Kung Fu is not bad at all,’ Tian Boguang said. ‘My attack wasn’t slow, yet he was able to move three inches back and barely escape my deathblow. Taishan Sword School’s Kung Fu has some real stuff. Brother Linghu, since this bull-nose ran away alive, you’re probably going to have quite a bit trouble after today. I intended to kill him just now and save you from further trouble, but too bad, I didn’t quite make it.’

“‘I get into trouble everyday,’ Big Brother Linghu said with a smile. ‘Forget about that darned trouble. Let’s drink. Brother Tian, if you had chopped the same way at me earlier – my Kung Fu is no match for Uncle-Master Tian-Song – I wouldn’t have made it out alive.’

“‘I held back some when I fought with you,’ Tian Boguang grinned. ‘That’s because I wanted to thank you for not killing me in the cave last night.’

“I felt very confused. Does that mean Big Brother Linghu was actually the winner when they fought in the cave, and Big Brother Linghu showed mercy and spared his life?”

At these words, everybody showed a disapproving face. They all thought that Linghu Chong shouldn’t have been so courteous to Tian Boguang, who was such an evil rapist.

Yilin went on, “‘Last night in the cave,’ Big Brother Linghu said, ‘I had already tried my best. My skills are not as good as yours. How dare I show you mercy?’

“Tian Boguang burst into a loud laugh. ‘When you and the little nun were hiding in the cave,’ he said, ‘the little nun made a noise and I discovered her whereabouts, but you were still holding your breath and I really had no idea that someone else was also hiding in the shadows. I was about to grab the little nun and break all her prohibitions. All you had to do was to wait a little bit longer till

I was fully enjoying myself, and then thrust your sword. You could have easily sent me on my way. Brother Linghu, you are not a twelve-year-old boy; you know how things are done. I know you are a true man of honor who does not want to kill from behind one's back, that's why you only poked me slightly on my shoulder.'

"Big Brother Linghu rebuffed him, 'If I had waited a little bit longer, the little nun would have already been humiliated by you. Listen to me. Yes, I get angry every time I see a nun, but since Heng-Shan Sword School is a member of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, and you were attacking one of its members. Something like that can not be tolerated.'

"'Well,' Tian Boguang grinned. 'If you had just stabbed three inches deeper, I would have lost my whole arm. Why did you draw back your sword after you poked me?'

"'I am an apprentice of the Huashan Sword School,' Big Brother Linghu said. 'I don't attack people from behind. You chopped me in the shoulder earlier. I stabbed you in the shoulder as payback to get even, so we could fight a fair fight. Nobody would have any advantage on the other.'

"Tian Boguang laughed loudly. 'Great! I am glad to make you a friend. Come on, let's drink another bowl.'

"'My Kung Fu may not be as good as yours, but my drinking tolerance is much better than yours,' Big Brother Linghu said.

"'Are you sure? I don't think so. You want a contest? Come on, let's first drink ten bowls of wine each,' Tian Boguang proposed.

"'Brother Tian,' Big Brother Linghu said with a frown, 'I thought you were a real man who wouldn't take advantage of others, that's why I wanted to bet on the drinking contest. But apparently I was wrong. I am really disappointed.'

"Tian Boguang looked at him from the corner of his eyes. 'How am I taking advantage of you?' he asked.

"'You know very well that I don't like nuns,' Big Brother Linghu said. 'Every

time I see a nun I feel uncomfortable and lose my appetite. How can I still have a drinking contest with you?'

"Tian Boguang laughed again. 'Brother Linghu,' he said, 'I know you are trying every trick you can to save this little nun. But I love beautiful women more than my own life. I've picked this beautiful little nun, and I'll never let her go. If you want me to set her free, there is only one way to make me.'

"'All right, spit it out then,' Big Brother Linghu said. 'Even if I have to go up a hill of knives or swim in a pot of boiling oil, I'll do it. If I hesitate at your request, then I am not a true man.'

"Tian Boguang filled two bowls with wine. 'Drink this bowl of wine and then I'll tell you,' he said with a big grin.

"Big Brother Linghu picked up the bowl and said, 'Bottom's up!' then gulped the wine down his throat. Tian Boguang also drank a bowl of wine. 'Brother Linghu,' he said, 'I see you as my friend. The rule of the Martial World is that there will be no molestation of a friend's wife. If you agree to marry this little nun…little nun….'" Yilin's face blushed while she spoke out these words. She stared at her feet and her voice became softer and softer. At the last word, her voice was so low that people could hardly discern her words.

Dingyi struck the table with her palm and yelled, "Nonsense! More and more obscenity! What happened after that?"

In a very soft tone Yilin said, "Tian Boguang kept spouting nonsense. 'For a true man, once his word is given, even a wagon with four horses cannot drag it back. If you agree to marry…marry her, I'll let her go right away. I will also bow to her and apologize to her. There is no other way but that!'

"'Bah!' Big Brother Linghu rebuffed. 'Do you want me to have bad luck for the rest of my life? Never mention that again.'

"Tian Boguang then said a lot more nonsense such as – once the hair grows back, a nun is not a nun anymore – and a lot of other crazy words that are too ridiculous to speak aloud. I covered up my ears and tried not to listen.

“‘Shut up!’ Big Brother Linghu cried out. ‘Stop making such crass jokes. You are driving me insane! How can I still participate in the contest when I am going insane? If you don’t let her go, then let’s fight till one of us drops dead.’

“‘You are no match for me in a fight!’ Tian Boguang said with a smirk.

“‘If we fight while standing up,’ Big Brother Linghu said, ‘I am not good enough to challenge you. But if we fight while sitting down, you are no match for me!’”

Everyone still remembered from Yilin’s story that Tian Boguang blocked over twenty fierce attacks from a Taishan Sword School master, Priest Tian-Song, without leaving his seat. It was quite obvious he was very good at fighting while sitting down. Apparently, Linghu Chong was intentionally trying to irritate him with those words.

“When one meets with such a villain, it might be a good idea to irritate him first before attacking,” He Sanqi said with a nod.

“Hearing these words,” Yilin went on, “Tian Boguang did not get angry at all. He simply said with a grin, ‘Brother Linghu, Tian Boguang admires your courage and personality, not your Kung Fu.’

“Big Brother Linghu immediately followed, ‘Linghu Chong admires your fast knife strokes while standing up, but not your fast knife strokes while sitting down.’

“‘There’s something you don’t know,’ Tian Boguang explained. ‘When I was a young boy, my legs had problems. For two years, I was only able to practice my knife skills sitting down. Fighting while sitting down is actually my specialty. Just now when I was fighting the bull…bull…priest, I wasn’t really deriding his skills; I was just used to fighting while sitting down, so I got lazy and didn’t bother to stand up. Brother Linghu, you are not as good as I am in this department.’

“‘Brother Tian, there’s something you don’t know either,’ Big Brother Linghu also began explaining. ‘Because of the problems of your legs, you had to practice your knife skills while sitting down for two years. That was only two

years. My other Kung Fu skills are not as good, but fighting while sitting down, I am really better. I practice my sword skills while sitting down every single day.'"

At these words, all eyes turned toward Lao Denuo, all wondering, "Is there really a special Huashan sword form that is practiced while sitting down?"

Lao Denuo shook his head. "Big Apprentice Brother was just kidding. Our sword school does not have such martial arts."

Yilin went on with the story, "Tian Boguang appeared to be taken by surprise. 'Really?' he said. 'Then I must be ignorant. I'd like to see this Huashan Sword School's Sit…Sit…What's the name of the sword art?'

"'This sword art was not taught by my respectful Master. I created it myself,' Big Brother Linghu grinned.

"Tian Boguang's face turned solemn at these words. 'I see,' he said. 'Brother Linghu, you must be a genius. That is very admirable!'"

Everyone in the hall knew exactly why Tian Boguang was so moved. In one's study of the Martial Arts, it was very difficult to create a new set of sword arts or hand fighting forms. One would have to have both first-class Kung Fu skills and outstanding knowledge and intelligence to find a way to create new moves. A big school like the Huashan Sword School had been in existence for several hundred years. Each of Huashan Sword School's martial arts moves was improved and tested thousands of times. It would have been very difficult to even modify just one of its existing moves, let alone create a new set of sword arts.

"Did Big Apprentice Brother create a new set of sword arts?" Lao Denuo thought to himself. "How come he never mentioned this to Master?"

Yilin continued, "Big Brother Linghu grinned. 'This set of sword arts is very smelly. There is nothing to admire about it.'

"Tian Boguang was confused. 'Why is it very smelly?' he asked. I was also very confused. A set of sword arts could be bad; how could it be smelly?

“Big Brother Linghu then explained, ‘Well, to tell you the truth, every morning when I go to the bathroom and sit on the toilet, there are always annoying flies flying around, so I would pick up my sword and try to kill the flies. In the beginning, I could hardly hit any of the flies, but after many days, my thrusts got better, and I could hit some of them. Gradually, my mind and thrusts worked in harmony, and I was able to create a set of sword arts out of thrusting at the flies. When I use this sword art, I am always sitting on a toilet, so of course it would be a bit smelly.’

“Hearing this, I could not help laughing. Big Brother Linghu was so funny. How could anyone practice sword arts like that? But when Tian Boguang heard these words, his face turned livid.

“‘Brother Linghu,’ he said angrily, ‘I see you as a friend, but what you said is just going too far. Are you saying that I am just a fly in the toilet? Well, then let me take a look at your…your…!’”

People in the hall could not help nodding. It was well known that when first-class Kung Fu masters fought, if one became impetuous, then he would have lost thirty percent of his chances of winning. Linghu Chong’s words were obviously intended to enrage Tian Boguang, and now that Tian Boguang did get angry, he had already stepped into the trap.

“Very good!” Dingyi remarked. “And then?”

Yilin went on, “Big Brother Linghu chuckled. ‘I practice this sword art just for fun, and never intended to use it to fight with anybody. Brother Tian, please don’t get the wrong impression. I would never compare you to a fly in the toilet.’ I couldn’t help laughing again.

“Tian Boguang got even angrier. He pulled out his knife and smacked it on the table. ‘Well, then let’s all sit down and see who’s better.’ Seeing the fierce look in his eyes, I was very frightened. Obviously he had decided to kill Big Brother Linghu.

“Big Brother Linghu said, ‘Fighting while sitting down, my Kung Fu is better, and you can’t possibly win. We just became good friends, brother Tian, why

ruin our relationship? Besides, Linghu Chong is a true man. I don't want to use what I am really good at to take advantage of a friend.'

"'I wish for it myself; nobody will blame you for taking advantage of me,' Tian Boguang scoffed.

"'Brother Tian, are you sure you really want it?' Big Brother Linghu asked.

"'Definitely!' Tian Boguang said without hesitation.

"'And you are sure you want to fight while we sit down?' Big Brother Linghu asked again.

"'Yes! Definitely fight while sitting down!' Tian Boguang confirmed again.

"Big Brother Linghu then said, 'Alright! If you say so! But we have to establish some rules first. Here it goes: before one can claim to be the victor, whoever stands up loses the contest.'

"'Exactly! Before one can claim to be the victor, whoever stands up loses the contest,' Tian Boguang agreed.

"'So what penalty shall we give to the loser?' Big Brother Linghu asked.

"'Whatever you say,' Tian Boguang answered.

"'Let me think about it,' Big Brother Linghu requested. He paused for a second and then said, 'Very well! First, starting from today, if the loser sees the little nun again, he shall behave himself. No impolite behavior or words. And as soon as he sees her, he shall bow in respect and say, 'Little Sister, apprentice Tian Boguang asks after your health.'

"'Bah, what do you mean? How do you know I am going to lose? What if you lose?' Tian Boguang complained.

"'Same for me,' Big Brother Linghu answered without hesitation. 'No matter who loses, he shall have to submit to Heng-Shan Sword School to be the grand-apprentice of Old Sister Dingyi and apprentice of this little nun.'

"Master, don't you think Big Brother Linghu was very funny? If the fight was between them, why would the loser have to submit to our Heng-Shan Sword

School? And how could I take them as my apprentices?" After these words, a slight smile appeared on her face. Her face had always looked upset before, but now when she smiled, it seemed as if a ray of sunshine had brightened the room.

"These crude people will say anything. Don't listen to them. Linghu Chong was just trying to enrage Tian Boguang," Dingyi said. After saying these words, she raised her head a little and narrowed her eyes, trying to figure out how Linghu Chong could win the fight. If he lost the fight, how could he go back on his word? She thought for a while and knew that her own intelligence was far less than the rascal Linghu Chong. It would just be a waste of energy. So she asked, "What did Tian Boguang say?"

"Seeing Big Brother Linghu speak with such confidence," Yilin said, "Tian Boguang showed a little hesitation. I guess he was a little worried. Maybe he was thinking that Big Brother Linghu could really have some outstanding fighting skills when sitting down.

"Big Brother Linghu kept nudging him, 'If you really don't want to submit to the Heng-Shan Sword School, then we'd better not have this contest.'

"'Nonsense!' Tian Boguang exclaimed angrily. 'Alright, I agree! Whoever loses will have the little nun as his Master!'

"'I cannot have you as my apprentices,' I said in a hurry. 'My Kung Fu skills are too weak, and my Master wouldn't let me either. All the people in our Heng-Shan Sword School, Buddhists or not, are female. How can we…how can we…?'

"Big Brother Linghu waved me off. 'I have made the decision with brother Tian. You simply have to accept it, whether you want to or not. It's not your call.' He then turned to Tian Boguang and said, 'Second, the loser will have to swing his knife and make himself a eunuch.' Master, what does 'swing his knife and make himself a eunuch' mean?"

Many people started chuckling. Dingyi could not help but grin herself, and a smile finally showed on her strict face. "Those were dirty words from the mouth

of a rascal," she said. "Good child, it is alright if you don't understand. You don't need to understand. Those are bad words."

"Oh, so those were bad words," Yilin said. "I thought since there are emperors, of course there will be eunuchs,[35] what's all the fuss about?

"Tian Boguang stared at Big Brother Linghu. 'Brother Linghu,' he asked, 'you are really sure you will win?'

"'Sure!' Big Brother Linghu answered. 'Fighting while standing up, I rank eighty-nine among the Kung Fu people in the Martial World, but fighting while sitting down, I rank at number two!'

"Tian Boguang became curious. 'If you are number two, then who is number one?' he asked.

"'The Chief of the Demon Cult, Dongfang Invincible!' Big Brother Linghu said."

Hearing the name "Chief of the Demon Cult, Dongfang Invincible," everybody's face changed color. Noticing the sudden change in facial expressions, Yilin breathed nervously, feeling afraid that she might have said something wrong. "Master," she asked, "did I say something wrong?"

"Just don't mention that person's name," Dingyi said. "So what did Tian Boguang say?"

Yilin answered, "Tian Boguang nodded. 'Chief Dongfang ranks number one, I totally agree,' he said. 'But calling yourself number two seems to be a bit cocky. Can you even defeat your own Master, Mr. Yue?'

"'I am only talking about fighting while sitting down,' Big Brother Linghu said. 'Fighting while standing up, my Master ranks at number eight, and I am only number eighty-nine, far behind the respectful Master.'

"'I see,' Tian Boguang nodded in agreement. 'Then fighting while standing up, where do I stand? And who did the ranking?'

"'This is a big secret,' Big Brother Linghu said in a confidential tone. 'Brother

Tian, since I am having a good chat with you, I might as well tell you. But never let this out, otherwise it can cause great upheaval in the entire Martial World. Three months ago, the five Head Masters of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance had a meeting at Mount Huashan to discuss the skills of the famous Kung Fu masters in the Martial World. While they were in a good mood, they decided to rank the masters in the Martial World just for fun. Brother Tian, to be frank, although the five Masters really disliked your personality, they had great regard for your Kung Fu skills. Fighting while standing up, you can be ranked at number fourteen.'"

Priest Tian-Men and Sister Dingyi exclaimed in unison, "Linghu Chong was talking nonsense! Nothing like that ever happened!"

"So Big Brother Linghu was just fooling him again?" Yilin asked. "Well, Tian Boguang didn't completely believe him either. He said, 'The Head Masters of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance are all outstanding and famous martial artists in the Martial World. They actually ranked me at number fourteen? That is really overwhelming. So brother Linghu, did you present your smelly Toilet Sword Art in front of the five Head Masters? If not, how did they rank you at number two?'

"Big Brother Linghu said with a grin, 'This Toilet Sword Art would be too embarrassing to show in public, especially in front of the five Head Masters. The sword art looks very ugly, but the moves are very ferocious. I was discussing it with some masters from heretical clans, and they all thought that nobody except Chief Dongfang could defeat the sword art. But brother Tian, I have to say that even though my sword art is very fierce, besides using it to kill flies when sitting on a toilet, it is really quite useless. Think about it, when you are really fighting with somebody, who would agree to sit down and not move? Even though we agreed to fight sitting down, as soon as you start to lose, of course you would get mad and stand up. You are ranked at number fourteen fighting while standing up, so with no effort, you could easily split me, the number two fighting while sitting down, into halves with just one chop. See, your number fourteen fighting while standing up is the real thing, and my number two

fighting while sitting down is just a novel trick. It's nothing to be proud of.'

"'Hmm, brother Linghu, you are really glib,' Tian Boguang said. 'How do you know I will definitely lose to you fighting while sitting down? How do you know I will get mad and stand up to kill you?'

"'Well,' Big Brother Linghu said, 'if you agree not to kill me after you lose, then I won't insist on the enu…eunuch rule. So you won't have to worry about having no descendants. Ok, enough talk already, let's fight!'

"He raised his arm and flipped the table. The table, together with all the wine kettles and bowls, flew to the side. The two just sat there, face to face. One held a knife; the other grabbed hold of a sword.

"'Go ahead,' Big Brother Linghu yelled, 'start your attack! Whoever stands up first – his butt leaving the chair – loses.'

"'All right!' Tian Boguang also yelled. 'Let's see who's going to stand up first!'

"Right before they started fighting, Tian Boguang glanced at me and then suddenly burst into loud laughter. 'Brother Linghu,' he said, 'well done! So you have set up an ambush in advance, and intentionally set limits on my actions. As we fight while sitting down, not being able to leave the chair, all your helpers will rush out – or even if they don't, just this little nun playing some trick behind my back might force me to stand up.'

"Big Brother Linghu also laughed loudly. 'If anyone helps me, then Linghu Chong is the loser. Little nun, do you want me to win or lose?'

"'Of course I want you to win,' I said. 'When you fight while sitting down, you are the second best in the world, so you won't lose to him.'

"'Good,' Big Brother Linghu said. 'Then please go! The quicker the better, the further the merrier! With a bald headed little nun in front of me, I don't need to go through the motions, I will have already lost.' He did not wait for Tian Boguang to comment and thrust his sword at him.

"Tian Boguang waved his knife and blocked the attack. 'Outstanding!' he smiled. 'Outstanding! What a great plan to rescue the little nun. Brother Linghu,

you are truly a babe…babe-hound. But the risk is a bit too high this time.'

"By then I finally realized: Big Brother Linghu's mentioning again and again that whoever stands up first loses was to give me a chance to run away. Tian Boguang could not leave his chair, so of course he would not be able to catch me."

Hearing this, the listeners all praised, in their hearts, the great effort Linghu Chong had made. His skills were not as good as Tian Boguang's. Other than by using this stratagem, there really wasn't any other way to help Yilin get away.

"The words 'babe-hound' *etc.* are all rude words. Never mention them again. Don't ever even think about them in your heart," Dingyi admonished.

Yilin lowered her head. "Yes, Master. So those were rude words too. I see."

"So you left right away, right?" Dingyi asked. "Once Tian Boguang killed Linghu Chong, you wouldn't be able to get away anymore."

"Yes," Yilin said. "Big Brother Linghu urged me again and again, so finally I bowed to him and said, 'Thank you, apprentice brother Linghu, for saving me!' Then I turned around to leave. When I got to the stairway, I heard Tian Boguang shouting, 'Gotcha!' When I looked back, two drops of blood splashed onto my clothes. Big Brother Linghu had taken a cut to the shoulder.

"Tian Boguang smirked, 'Well, I think your number two ranking sword art while sitting down is really nothing special!'

"'The little nun is still here,' Big Brother Linghu said, 'how am I to beat you? I am doomed to fail from bad luck!'

"I figured since Big Brother Linghu really disliked nuns, if I stayed any longer, he might really die because of me, so I rushed down the stairs. After I got out of the wine house, I could still hear all the clang of metal made by the sword and knife.

"Then Tian Boguang shouted again, 'Gotcha!' I was very worried and knew that Big Brother Linghu must have taken another cut, but I dared not to go up to the wine house again. I climbed up the roof of the wine house from the side of

the building, and bent over the roof to look inside the window. What I saw was very frightening. Big Brother Linghu was still fighting fiercely with his sword, with blood all over him. Tian Boguang, on the other hand, was not hurt at all.

"After another while, Tian Boguang shouted again, 'Gotcha!' He slashed Big Brother Linghu's left arm and then pulled back his knife. 'Brother Linghu, I am being nice this time!' he said with a smile.

"'I know. If you had cut a little deeper, my left arm would be gone by now!' Big Brother Linghu answered, also with a smile.

"Master, how was he still able to smile in such a bad condition?

"'You still want to fight?' Tian Boguang asked.

"'Of course I do! Did I stand up?' Big Brother Linghu said.

"'I suggest you give it up and stand up!' Tian Boguang said. 'Forget about the bet. You don't have to ask that little nun to be your master.'

"Big Brother Linghu said, 'For a true man, once his word is out, even a wagon with four horses cannot drag it back. I gave my word; I am still accountable.'

"Tian Boguang complimented him, 'I've seen many tough guys before. But this is the first time I see a true hero, brother Linghu. Fine! Let's call it a tie and stop right here, alright?'

"Big Brother Linghu just looked at him with a smile and said nothing. Blood kept flowing from his different wounds and dripping onto the wood floor. Tian Boguang lowered his knife and was just about to stand up when he suddenly remembered that he would have lost if he had stood up. His body had moved upward a little when he quickly sat back down and did not leave the chair.

"'Brother Tian, you are clever!' Big Brother Linghu grinned."

Everyone could not help but let out an "Ah" of pity for Linghu Chong.

Yilin continued. "Tian Boguang picked up his knife again. 'I am going to use my fast strokes now,' he said. 'If I wait any longer, the little nun will have run to wonderland, and I won't be able to keep up with her anymore.'

“I trembled when I heard his words. I also worried that Big Brother Linghu might get killed by him, but I had no clue as to what to do next. Then a thought popped into my head: Big Brother Linghu fought so hard against him just to rescue me. The only way to save Big Brother Linghu’s life was to commit suicide right in front of them. So I unsheathed the broken sword by my waist, ready to jump into the wine house. Right at that moment, Big Brother Linghu’s body swayed suddenly, and he collapsed onto the floor together with his chair. He pushed on the ground with his hands and struggled to get up with the chair at his back, but he was so badly wounded that he just couldn’t get up.

“Tian Boguang was quite content, and with a big smile on his face, he said, ‘Number two for sitting down. What rank for crawling?’ With those words, he stood up.

“Big Brother Linghu burst into loud laughter. ‘You lost!’ he said.

“Tian Boguang laughed hard. ‘You were just defeated in such an embarrassing manner, and you are calling me a loser?’

“‘What did we agree on?’ Big Brother Linghu asked while lying on the floor.

“‘We agreed that we fight while sitting down,’ Tian Boguang answered, ‘and whoever stands up first – his butt leaving the chair – is…is…is…!’ He stuttered the word ‘is’ three times but could not finish his sentence. He could only point at Big Brother Linghu with his finger in disbelief. He had just realized that this was a trick and he had been fooled. He had already stood up, but Big Brother Linghu had not stood up and his rear end was still touching the chair. Although his body was in a very embarrassing position, but according to the agreement, he had already won.”

People in the hall started applauding and cheering. Only Yu Canghai gave a disgruntled snort and scoffed, “A rascal playing unscrupulous tricks with the rapist Tian Boguang; what an embarrassment to all decent schools!”

“What kind of crap is that?” Dingyi said angrily. “A true man fights with his brain, not his muscles. I did not see any one in your Qingcheng Sword School act so bravely.” Hearing from Yilin about how Linghu Chong had saved the

Heng-Shan Sword School's reputation with no regard to his own safety, she felt very thankful deep in her heart, and had already disregarded all negative thoughts about Linghu Chong.

Yu Canghai snorted. "What a wonderful crawling young hero!"

"Your Qingcheng Sword School…!" Dingyi started yelling when Liu Zhengfeng cut her short, afraid to see conflict between them again.

"Nephew apprentice, did Tian Boguang admit defeat?" he asked Yilin.

"Tian Boguang stood there staring blankly at the floor and could not make up his mind," Yilin went on.

"'Little apprentice sister of the Heng-Shan Sword School, you can come down now,' Big Brother Linghu shouted. 'Congratulations on getting a first-class apprentice!' It turned out that he already knew I was sneaking about on the roof.

"Tian Boguang is a bad man, but he does keep his word. He could have just stepped up and killed Big Brother Linghu easily with a single blow, and then turned around to catch me, but he simply shouted out, 'Little nun, listen up! If you ever dare see me again, I will finish you off with a single chop.'

"I never wanted to have the villain as my apprentice in the first place, so his words were like music to my ears. Tian Boguang shoved his knife back into its sheath, and then stormed out of the wine house. I then jumped down into the wine house, helped Big Brother Linghu up, and took out the 'Heavenly Connecting Glue' to put on his wounds. After counting the wounds, I found up to thirteen different ones on his body…."

"Sister Dingyi, congratulations!" Yu Canghai suddenly cut in.

"Congratulation for what?" Dingyi gave him a hard stare.

"Congratulations for getting such a reputable and master-level new grand-apprentice!"

Dingyi was enraged. She struck the table heavily and stood up.

"Master Yu, you're at fault this time. How can we Taoists make such silly

jokes?" Priest Tian-Men cut in.

Knowing that first of all, he was in the wrong, and secondly, Priest Tian-Men would be a tough opponent, Yu Canghai turned his head away and pretended not to hear anything.

Yilin continued, "I finished dressing Big Brother Linghu's wounds and then helped him up to sit on the chair. Big Brother Linghu was breathing very heavily. 'Would you please pour a bowl of wine for me?' he requested. I poured the wine and handed him the bowl. Then footsteps came from the stairway, and two men walked in. He was one of the two." She pointed at the Qingcheng apprentice who had carried Luo Renjie's body in a while ago. Then she said, "The other one was the villain Luo Renjie. They looked at me and then looked at Big Brother Linghu and then looked back at me with very impolite stares."

The listeners all thought: when Luo Renjie and his companion saw the blood-covered Linghu Chong sitting together with a beautiful nun in the wine house, and the little nun was pouring wine for him, they would certainly feel very awkward. Then staring impolitely would not be an unusual reaction.

Yilin kept on telling the story. "Big Brother Linghu glanced at Luo Renjie and then asked, 'Apprentice sister, do you know what Kung Fu the Qingcheng Sword School is best at?'

"'I don't know. I heard that the Qingcheng Sword School has many good Kung Fu skills,' I replied.

"'Correct!' Big Brother Linghu said. 'The Qingcheng Sword School has many good Kung Fu skills. But the best one, ha-ha, I'd better not mention it to avoid conflict.' Then he gave Luo Renjie a stare back.

"Hearing his words, Luo Renjie rushed forward. 'Which one is the best one? Spit it out!' he yelled.

"'I didn't want to say it,' Big Brother Linghu smirked. 'But you really want me to say it, right? It's a move called 'Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand'.'

"Luo Renjie struck the table with his palm and bellowed, 'Nonsense! What is

‘Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand’? I’ve never heard of it!’

“‘This is the very special skill of your respectful school, how can you not have heard about it?’ Big Brother Linghu chuckled. ‘Turn around, I’ll show you the move.’

“Luo Renjie started swearing at Big Brother Linghu and suddenly threw a punch at him. Big Brother Linghu tried to stand up and dodge it, but because he had lost too much blood and did not have much strength to move, he tumbled and then sat back down on the chair. The punch landed squarely on his nose. Blood immediately started flowing. Luo Renjie punched him again and I hurriedly blocked his fist with my hand.

“‘Don’t hit him!’ I demanded. ‘Can’t you see he is badly wounded? Bullying a badly wounded man, what kind of a man are you?’

“Luo Renjie scolded, ‘Ha, this little nun thinks this rascal is so handsome and has fallen for him! Get out of the way. If you don’t, I’ll beat you up too.’

“‘If you dare to hit me, I’ll tell your Master Yu.’ I threatened.

“‘Ha-ha, you didn’t follow your nun rules and violated the moral prohibitions; anyone can punish you,’ Luo said. Master, wasn’t he wronging innocent people?

“He poked his left hand toward me. I tried to block it, but didn’t notice it was a feint. Then his right hand suddenly stretched out and pinched my left cheek. He began to laugh loudly. I was very angry and fought back with three palm heel strikes, but he dodged them all.

“‘Apprentice sister,’ Big Brother Linghu called out to me. ‘Don’t fight him. Let me get my breathing going, then I’ll be just fine.’ I turned to look at him; his face was so pale.

“Luo Renjie ran to him and punched at him again. Big Brother Linghu deflected Luo’s punch with his left palm and redirected it, which turned Luo’s own body around, and then he threw a kick and it landed right on his…his rear end. The kick was quick and accurate, swift and smooth. Luo Renjie could not keep his balance and rolled all the way down the stairs.

“‘Apprentice sister,’ Big Brother Linghu whispered to me. ‘This is their Qingcheng Sword School’s best move called ‘Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand.’ Bum Bum back is where they get ready to be kicked, then geese landing…landing…in sand. Don’t you think it was an accurate description?’

“I wanted to laugh, but I became really worried when I saw his face getting paler and paler. ‘Take a rest, and don’t talk,’ I said. Blood gushed out from his wounds again, obviously because he used too much strength when he threw the kick and the wounds opened up again.

“Luo Renjie rushed back immediately, after rolling down the staircase, with a sword in his hand this time. ‘You are Huashan Linghu Chong, aren’t you?’ he yelled.

“Big Brother Linghu grinned. ‘You are already the third master of your respectful school who used this ‘Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand’ on me. No wonder…no wonder….’ He started to cough badly. Fearing that Luo Renjie might harm him, I drew my sword and stood by his side, guarding him.

“Luo Renjie turned to his fellow apprentice. ‘Junior apprentice Li, you deal with this little nun,’ he commanded. The Li villain answered and unsheathed his sword to attack me.

“While defending myself with my sword, I saw Luo Renjie thrusting his sword again and again at Big Brother Linghu, and Big Brother Linghu could hardly raise his sword to fend him off. He was really in great danger. After several rounds, Big Brother Linghu’s sword fell down to the floor. Luo Renjie thrust his sword out, and placed the point of his sword at Big Brother Linghu’s chest and smirked, ‘If you call me Grandfather of Qingcheng three times, I’ll spare your life.’

“‘Sure, I will! I will!’ Big Brother Linghu smiled. ‘After I call you that, are you going to teach me your school’s famous Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing…?’ Before he could even finish this sentence, Luo Renjie the villain pushed his sword forward and stabbed the sword into Big Brother Linghu’s chest. The villain was so ruthless…!”

Crystal teardrops began pouring down her face. She continued her story while sobbing, “I…I…I saw what happened and rushed to stop him, but his sword had already penetrated…penetrated Big Brother Linghu’s chest.” Everyone in the hall fell silent.

Yu Canghai felt that all the looks directed toward him were full of disdain and anger. “Are you sure about your story?” he asked. “If, as you said, Luo Renjie had already killed Linghu Chong, how did Luo Renjie die from his sword?”

“After Big Brother Linghu was stabbed,” Yilin said, “he squeezed out a smile and whispered to me, ‘Little apprentice sister, I…I have an important secret to tell you. The Fortune…Fortune Prestige Escort House’s Evil-Resisting…Evil-Resisting Sword Art Manuscript is at…at….’ His voice became lower and lower, and I could hardly hear him, only saw his lips moving….”

Yu Canghai was shocked at the words “Fortune Prestige Escort House’s Evil-Resisting Sword Art Manuscript.” He anxiously began to ask, “At…?” He was going to say “at which place,” but then he realized it would be very bad to ask the question in front of so many people, so he swallowed his words right away, yet his heart thumped harder and harder, hoping the young, inexperienced Yilin would say it out loud. Otherwise, when Sister Dingyi asked for details later and learned all the important connections, she would never let him know the secret.

“Luo Renjie seemed to be very concerned about that sword art manuscript,” Yilin said. “He walked closer and bent over to listen to what Big Brother Linghu was saying about the location of the sword art manuscript. Suddenly, Big Brother Linghu raised the sword he dropped on the floor, and pushed the sword into Luo Renjie’s lower abdomen. The villain fell on his back. His limbs twitched a couple of times, but he could no longer stand up. It turned out… turned out… Big Brother Linghu fooled him into coming closer, so he could kill him for revenge.”

After having finished retelling the past events, she could no longer handle the stress. She swayed back and forth a little and then fainted. Dingyi extended her arm to support her while glaring at Yu Canghai angrily.

All the listeners stayed silent and tried to imagine the epic fight in the Huiyan Wine House. Compared to masters like Priest Tian-Men, Liu Zhengfeng, Mr. Wen, He Sanqi and others, the skills of those like Linghu Chong or Luo Renjie were nothing special, but the entire event was so astounding and brutal. It was very rare for something like this to occur in the Martial World, especially when told by such a pure and pretty young nun, obviously there was no exaggeration.

"Mr. Li, you were there. So did you see the whole thing?" Liu Zhengfeng asked the Qingcheng apprentice named Li.

The Li-named apprentice did not answer, just looked at Yu Canghai. Seeing the expression on his face, all knew that the whole thing happened exactly as it was told. If Yilin had said a word that was not factual, he would have argued.

Yu Canghai turned to stare at Lao Denuo with a livid face. "Nephew apprentice Lao," he asked coldly, "What on earth did we, the Qingcheng Sword School, do that offended your respectful school so much, that your senior apprentice brother would provoke trouble over and over with the apprentices of my Qingcheng Sword School?"

"I don't know." Lao Denuo shook his head. "It seems to be a personal conflict between senior brother Linghu and apprentice brother Luo of your respectful school. It has nothing to do with the relationship between the Qingcheng Sword School and the Huashan Sword School."

Yu Canghai sneered. "Has nothing to do, indeed! You really know how to clear things up…." He hadn't even finished his words when suddenly, with a loud "crack," the west window burst open and a man flew in. Most of the people in the hall were masters and reacted quickly by dodging to the side, ready to defend themselves. Before anyone had the chance to actually take a good look at the man who had flown in, there was a second loud "crack," and another person flew in. The two men landed on the floor face down and just lay there still. Both were in long purple robes, the type of uniform worn by members of the Qingcheng Sword School. On the seat of their pants, each had the very clear imprint of a muddy foot. A husky old voice spoke loudly outside of the window tauntingly, "'Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand!' Ha-ha! Ha-ha!"

Without any hesitation, Yu Canghai struck a palm stance in the direction of the voice, and jumped out the window to give chase. Pushing the window frame slightly using his left hand, he jumped onto the roof. Standing there, he looked in every direction, but all he could see was the dark night sky with a shower falling down like a hanging curtain. There was no sign of anyone. He quickly concluded that it was impossible for anyone to vanish in such a short time. Therefore, the intruder must be hiding close by. Knowing that the man must be a formidable opponent, he drew his long sword and quickly searched all around the House of Liu.

Priest Tian-Men stayed in his seat concerned about his dignity, but Sister Dingyi, He Sanqi, Mr. Wen, Liu Zhengfeng, and Lao Denuo all jumped up onto the roof. They could see the short Taoist priest running about holding a sword. The flash of his sword took the appearance of a beam of white light and flew around the dozens of houses with magnificent speed. All inwardly praised the high level of Yu Canghai's Qing-Gong skills.

Yu Canghai dashed about rapidly; none of the corners, trees, or bushes escaped his searching eyes, but he found nothing out of place. Then, he jumped back into the hall. The two apprentices were still lying on the floor. In his mind, the clear footprints on their backsides turned into hundreds of laughing faces of people in the Martial World, mocking the Qingcheng Sword School for losing face. Yu Canghai turned one apprentice over and recognized him as apprentice Shen Renjun. He didn't have to turn the other one over; the beard clearly showed that it was the one who always hung out with Shen Renjun – Ji Rentong. Yu Canghai struck the acupoints next to Shen Renjun's ribs twice, and then asked, "Who did this to you?"

Shen Renjun opened his mouth, but nothing came out of his mouth. Yu Canghai was startled. When he struck Shen Renjun, he pretended to be doing something very easy, since so many first-class masters were watching. However, he had actually used a type of Qingcheng high-level inner strength. Despite this, Shen Renjun's acupoints remained sealed, which left him no other option but to gather all his inner strength and start passing it to Shen Renjun through the Ling-

Tai Acupoint on Shen's back.

After quite a while, Shen Renjun was finally able to speak in a stuttering voice, "Mast…Master!" Yu Canghai did not answer and kept passing more energy through the acupoint. "I…I did not see who it was." Shen Renjun croaked.

"How were you tricked?" Yu Canghai asked.

"Fellow apprentice Ji and I went outside to take a leak. I just felt numbness on my back, and then fell into that son of a turtle's hands." Shen Renjun said.

Yu Canghai straightened his face. "He is a first-class master. Show some respect."

"Yes, Master." Shen Renjun stammered.

Yu Canghai simply could not figure out where the enemy could possibly have come from. He raised his head and saw the indifferent face of Priest Tian-Men. It seemed that he did not care about what had happened at all. Yu Canghai thought to himself, "The members of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance claim to be 'same root different branches.' Since Renjie killed Linghu Chong, it looks like even Tian-Men is blaming me for that." Suddenly he realized that the hidden enemy was most likely still in the Great Hall, so he signaled Shen Renjun to follow him and then quickly walked into the Great Hall.

People in the hall were still chatting and making wild conjectures as to who had killed the apprentice of the Taishan Sword School and the apprentice of the Qingcheng Sword School. When they saw Yu Canghai coming in, some recognized him as the Head Master of Qingcheng Sword School. For the ones who did not know him, even though all they saw was a short man, the way he walked and behaved clearly showed the dignity of a great master. So soon, they all stopped talking. Silence fell over the entire hall. Yu Canghai looked through the crowd closely, person by person. Most of the people in the hall belonged to the junior generation in the Martial World. Although he did not know many of them, by each one's apparel, he could determine which school they belonged to. He knew that no one from the junior generation of any school could be such a

master with great inner strength. If this person were really in the hall, he must look somehow different from the others. He looked and looked, one after another, when suddenly, his sharp gaze picked out a man.

This man had a very ugly face. The very muscles on his face seemed to have been twisted by some kind of evil magical force. Several pieces of plaster were spread across his face, and a big hump stood out from his back.

Yu Canghai could not contain his surprise when he suddenly thought about the man's identity. "Could it be him?" he asked himself. The 'Hunchback of the North,' Mu Gaofeng, always hung around the northern border, and seldom showed up in the central region. He had no connection with the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, so why would he show up in Liu Zhengfeng's hand-washing ceremony? But if it were not him, Yu Canghai could think of no other ugly hunchbacks in the Martial World.

The other people in the hall followed Yu Canghai's gaze and saw the hunchback. Several older members of the crowd, who knew more about the Martial World, let out cries of surprise. Liu Zhengfeng rushed toward the hunchback and greeted him, "I didn't realize that your honor had come, and did not serve you well, please pardon me."

In actuality, the hunchback was nobody famous. He was none other than the young master of the Fortune Prestige Escort House – Lin Pingzhi. Afraid of being recognized by the others, he had kept his head down the entire time and stayed in a corner of the Great Hall. If Yu Canghai had not searched very carefully, nobody would ever have noticed him. But now that everybody's eyes were fixed on him, Lin Pingzhi felt very embarrassed. He stood up immediately, bowed back to Liu Zhengfeng and said, "Not really, not really!"

Liu Zhengfeng knew that Mu Gaofeng was from the northern border region, but the man in front of him had a southern accent. He also seemed to be far too young. Despite his doubts, he knew that Mu Gaofeng always liked to come and go like a shadow; it wouldn't be appropriate to judge his behavior using common standards. So he said very politely, "I am Liu Zhengfeng. May I have the honor to ask your respectful name?"

Lin Pingzhi never thought that someone would ask him about his name. He mumbled a couple of words but did not answer.

"You and Hero Mu…?" Liu Zhengfeng asked again.

An idea suddenly came to Lin Pingzhi's mind: "My last name is Lin. If I use only half of it, it's the character Mu."[36] So he said quickly, "Mu is my family name."

"Mr. Mu's coming to Hengshan has brought great honor to our Liu House. May I ask what is the relationship between you and 'Hunchback of the North,' Hero Mu?" Liu Zhengfeng inquired. He could tell that Lin Pingzhi was just a young lad, and those pieces of plaster on his face were used just to hide his true identity. He was definitely not the man who had been renowned for decades – 'Hunchback of the North' Mu Gaofeng.

Lin Pingzhi had never heard of the name 'Hunchback of the North' Mu Gaofeng before, but by the tone and voice of Liu Zhengfeng, he could tell the man named Mu had quite a reputation. Also, Yu Canghai was still glaring at him with a fierce look on his face; if he revealed his true identity, Yu Canghai would probably kill him without batting an eyelid. In such a precarious situation, the only right thing to do was to make some innocuous statements and fob them off with some vague answers. So he said, "'Hunchback of the North' Hero Mu? He is…he is a senior of mine." He thought if that man was called a hero, then of course the name "senior" would be appropriate.

Without finding anyone else suspicious, Yu Canghai had presumed this was the one who had humiliated his apprentices Shen Renjun and Ji Rentong. Even if 'Hunchback of the North' Mu Gaofeng had come himself, he would only be cautious but not afraid. Now this one was only a child of Mu Gaofeng's family, Yu Canghai really did not take him seriously. It was this man who had first provoked the Qingcheng Sword School. There was no way that he was going to let that go easily.

"Qingcheng Sword School has never crossed paths with Mr. Mu of the north. I wonder how we have offended you?" he said coldly.

Standing face to face in front of the short priest, Lin Pingzhi remembered how his home was broken up; how his family was ruined, and his parents were taken prisoners. He didn't even know if they were still alive. And all this happened because of this short priest standing right in front of him. Although he knew the short priest's Kung Fu skills were a hundred times better than his own, he almost couldn't help drawing his weapon and lunging forward. But after all the days of hardship following his escape, he was no longer the same dandy of Fuzhou town. He took a deep breath and tried to control himself.

"Qingcheng Sword School has committed unrighteous deeds and Hero Mu happened to catch them, so of course he interferes. He is very warm-hearted and always enjoys helping the good against the evil. Why would he care if you offended him personally or not?" he replied.

Hearing these words, Liu Zhengfeng couldn't help laughing inwardly. Although 'Hunchback of the North' Mu Gaofeng had high Kung Fu skills, his moral standing was not particularly good at all. He only used the words "Hero Mu" in a very casual way. Compared to Mu Gaofeng's true character, the word "Hero" was far from a true description. This man curried favor with the powerful and never kept his promises. But he had excellent Kung Fu skills and was always alert and careful, so if one ever offended him, it would be impossible to guard against him. That was why even though people in the Martial World might be afraid of him, no one really had any respect for him. When Liu Zhengfeng heard Lin Pingzhi's words, he truly believed that Lin was a member of Mu's family and was afraid that Yu Canghai might hurt him.

"Master Yu, Brother Mu," he said with a smile, "both of you are respectful guests in my humble place. Please, for my sake, let's drink a friendly shot of wine? Servants, wine!"

Soon, servants brought out wine.

Yu Canghai thought nothing of the young hunchback before him. But considering all the dirty and evil tricks of Mu Gaofeng he had heard before, he would rather not challenge him right away. After the wine was poured, he did not pick up the cup straightaway, instead, just waited to see what Lin Pingzhi

would do.

Lin Pingzhi wavered between anger and fear, but finally anger overwhelmed him. He thought to himself, “Probably Mom and Dad have already died under the short priest’s murderous hands. I’d rather die than drink with him.” He glared at Yu Canghai with hatred-filled eyes and did not pick up his wine cup either. He wanted to spit out some curses, but being afraid of Yu Canghai, he remained silent.

Seeing all the hostility shown by this hunchback, Yu Canghai could not hold his temper any longer. He suddenly grabbed Lin Pingzhi by his wrist. “Alright, alright, alright! Out of respect of Master Liu, no one will cause any trouble in the Liu House. Brother Mu, let us get to know each other,” he said.

Lin Pingzhi pulled his arm hard, but could not escape Yu Canghai’s grip. Right after Yu spilled out his last word, a great pain shot through his wrist. He could hear his bone cracking and it seemed as though his wrist was going to be completely crushed.

Yu Canghai halted the pressure and waited for Lin Pingzhi to beg for mercy, but Lin Pingzhi hated him so much that he did not even let out a groan in spite of the wrenching pain from his wrist.

Standing by the side, Liu Zhengfeng could see big drops of sweat trickling down Lin Pingzhi’s forehead, but his face remained defiant and did not show any sign of capitulation. He admired the toughness of this young man, so he called out, “Master Yu!” and was just about to separate the two, when suddenly a high-pitched voice said, “Master Yu, why are you so eager to bully Mu Gaofeng’s grandson?”

Everyone turned around to look, and saw a fat hunchback standing at the hall’s entrance. He had white scars crisscrossing his face, with black spots in between, and an enormous hump on his back. He looked horribly ugly and queer. Most of the people in the hall had never seen the real face of Mu Gaofeng; now hearing this man claim to be Mu Gaofeng and seeing his bizarre appearance, all were astonished.

The hunchback had a fat body, but that did not prevent him from moving at amazing speed. People only saw a blurry shadow, and the hunchback was already standing next to Lin Pingzhi. He patted on Lin Pingzhi's shoulder. "Good lad, good lad! Bragging about your grandpa by saying things like helping the good guys against the evil and so on sounded wonderful! I really enjoyed it!" After these words, he patted Lin Pingzhi's shoulder again.

When he patted Lin's shoulder the first time, Lin Pingzhi felt a big shock going through his entire body. Yu Canghai also felt a stream of heat in his arm, and he almost had to let go of Lin Pingzhi's hand. But he immediately added more strength to his grip and held the wrist solidly.

Since the first pat did not get Lin Pingzhi out of Yu Canghai's hold, Mu Gaofeng gathered his strength while talking to Lin, and when he patted on Lin's shoulder the second time, he used more than eighty percent of his strength. Lin Pingzhi felt that for a just second, he had lost his vision, and something sweet welled up from his throat, then blood filled his mouth. He tried his best to not spill any blood and swallowed it all back down.

Yu Canghai felt burning heat under his palm; he could not hold Lin's wrist any longer and had to let go of it, taking a step back. "This hunchback really lives up to his reputation of cruel and evil," he thought to himself. "Just to break my hold, he would inflict internal damage to his own grandson."

Lin Pingzhi gathered his strength and managed to squeeze out a laugh. "Master Yu," he said to Yu Canghai, "your Qingcheng School's skills are truly feeble. Compared to this 'Hunchback of the North' Hero Mu, you are a laggard. I suggest you submit yourself under Hero Mu and ask him to teach you a few moves, then…then…you might…improve a little…." Due to the internal injuries, he had to try hard to get these words out, feeling as though all his internal organs had been turned upside down. He finally finished his sentence, but his body had started shaking so badly that he almost fell.

"Yes!" Yu Canghai exclaimed. "Your suggestion has merit! Since you, yourself, are studying under Mr. Mu, your Kung Fu skills must be quite remarkable. I would like to check them out." By saying these particular words,

Yu Canghai was basically telling everyone that his challenge was strictly for Lin Pingzhi, and that Mu Gaofeng should not interfere.

Mu Gaofeng took a few paces back and grinned. “My cute little grandson, I am afraid your skills are still too low and will be no match for the Head Master of Qingcheng Sword School. He can whack you with his first move. As your grandpa, I am overjoyed to have such a hunchbacked and also handsome grandson. I’d really hate to lose such a good kid. Why don’t you kneel down and kowtow to your grandpa, then your grandpa will take him on for you. How does that sound?”

Lin Pingzhi looked at Yu Canghai and thought, “If I get into a fight with Yu recklessly, he will probably kill me with the first blow in his fury. If I can’t even protect myself, how can I avenge my parents? But I, Lin Pingzhi, am a grown man, how can I call this hunchback Grandpa? It’s alright if I myself am humiliated, but doing this will be a dreadful humiliation for my father as well. He would never be able to walk with his head up; how could he survive the Martial World? If I kneel down in front of this man, then I would be living under the fame of the Hunchback of the North and never be myself again.” Not able to decide, he held onto the table with his left hand and his entire body trembled slightly.

“I know you have no guts! If you want somebody else to fight for you, what’s so big a deal to kowtow a couple of times?” Yu Canghai mocked. He could tell that Lin Pingzhi and Mu Gaofeng’s relationship wasn’t anything usual. It was obvious that Mu Gaofeng wasn’t his real grandfather, otherwise, why did Lin Pingzhi only call him “Senior,” but never “Grandpa?” Mu Gaofeng wouldn’t be asking his own grandson to kowtow at such a moment, either. He wanted to provoke Lin Pingzhi into fighting himself, thus making things much easier to handle.

Memories flashed through Lin Pingzhi’s mind, including how the Fortune Prestige Escort House was bullied and humiliated again and again by the Qingcheng Sword School. He thought to himself, “A true man will not let a small setback ruin his master plan. As long as I eventually feel pride and elation,

why can't I suffer some humiliation now?" So he turned around, knelt down in front of Mu Gaofeng, and started to kowtow. "Grandpa," he said, "Yu Canghai uninhibitedly kills innocent people and robs them of their belongings. Everyone in the Martial World has the right to kill him. Would you please uphold justice and rid this evil for all the people in the Martial World?"

Lin's action was a big surprise for both Mu Gaofeng and Yu Canghai. The young hunchback acted with resolution and integrity when Yu Canghai grabbed his wrist and crushed it with his inner strength, but he was now actually willing to kowtow and beg for protection, especially in public with so many people around. Most people thought that this young hunchback was really the grandson of Mu Gaofeng; and even if he wasn't a real blood relative, he must be at least a grand-apprentice or something along those lines. Only Mu Gaofeng himself knew for certain that this man had no relationship with him whatsoever. Although Yu Canghai had an inkling that there was something suspicious going on, he still could not determine the actual relationship between the two. All he knew was that the "Grandpa" was said in a very reluctant manner, maybe because Lin was just afraid to die.

Mu Gaofeng burst into loud laughter. "Good boy, nice lad! Why, you really want to play the game?" He praised Lin Pingzhi while staring at Yu Canghai, so the words "good boy" and "nice lad" almost seemed to be directed at Yu Canghai.

Yu Canghai was furious, but he calmed and readied himself, knowing that the fight today would not only be important to his own destiny, but also to the destiny and fame of the entire Qingcheng Sword School. He let out a smile.

"If Mr. Mu wants to present his outstanding skills in front of all our friends here, I'll just have to play along."

Earlier, when Mu Gaofeng patted on Lin Pingzhi's shoulder, Yu Canghai had already learned that Mu had resourceful inner strength. And his inner strength was the explosive type; once he started the attack, it would be as overwhelming as thunder and lightning, or like landslides and tidal waves. "It is well known that this hunchback is very conceited," he thought to himself. "If he can't defeat

me in a short time, he will become reckless and rush his attack. I'd better use all defensive moves for the first one hundred bouts. That will keep me undefeated. After one hundred moves, I will surely be able to find his weaknesses."

Mu Gaofeng studied Yu Canghai carefully. This short priest only had the height of a youth, and probably weighed only eighty pounds, but by the way he stood, he seemed to be as stable as a mountain, well displaying the imposing manner of a great master; obviously he had well developed inner strength.

Mu Gaofeng thought to himself, "This little priest really is something. Every generation of Qingcheng Sword School has had famous people. This bull-nose priest, being the Head Master of the sword school, certainly won't be someone easy to deal with. I hope I won't lose this battle and let all my fame swirl down the pipe." Being a very careful person, he did not recklessly attack right away.

Right at the moment when the two were about to fight, two men flew out from the back, and with two loud thumps, landed on the floor and lay still. Both men wore purple robes, and each had a muddy footprint right on the bottom. The clear and melodious voice of a young girl shouted, "This is Qingcheng Sword School's best move, called 'Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand'!"

Yu Canghai was outraged. Turning around without wasting any time, he dashed toward the sound without even looking. Seeing a young girl in a green shirt standing nearby, he instantly grabbed her by the arm.

"Mom!" the girl screamed loudly and then burst into tears.

Yu Canghai was startled. After hearing the embarrassing words, he acted in great anger without thinking. He had thought that she must have been involved with what had happened to the two Qingcheng apprentices, so he grabbed her arm at full strength. When he heard the girl's scream, he realized he had made a terrible mistake. This was just a little girl. How could he have used such power against her? In front of so many people, such behavior really did not fit with his image as the Head Master of Qingcheng Sword School. He quickly let go of her arm, yet the girl cried louder and louder.

"You broke my arm. Mom, my arm is broken! Waah, it hurts! It hurts!" The

girl cried.

Head Master Yu of the Qingcheng Sword School had fought many fights and overcome many difficulties, but this was the first time he had been placed in such an embarrassing situation. Being stared at by hundreds of accusing eyes, he felt his face burn with shame, and he did not even know where to put his arms and feet.

"Don't cry! Don't cry!" he whispered to the girl. "Your arm is not broken. It won't break."

"It's broken already. Why are you bullying me? A grownup beats up a kid, shame on you! Waah, it hurts! Waah…!" she cried.

The young girl was about thirteen or fourteen years of age. She had a green blouse on. With skin as white as milk and a pretty little face, she looked adorable. The crowd in the hall all felt sympathy for her. A couple of the rougher members had already started shouting out, "Beat the bull-nose up!" "Kill the short priest!"

Yu Canghai was very embarrassed. He knew he had incurred the public wrath, so he dared not to say anything, and just said to the girl, "Little sister, don't cry. I am sorry. Let me look at your arm, see if it hurts." He wanted to roll her sleeves up, but the girl screamed, "No, no! Don't touch me! Mom, Mom, the short priest broke my arm."

While Yu Canghai was completely lost, a man in a purple robe walked out from the crowd. It was none other than Fang Renzhi, the most cunning apprentice of the Qingcheng Sword School. "Hey, little girl, you're just pretending now!" he said. "My Master's hand did not even touch your sleeve, so how could he have broken your arm?"

"Mom, another one is coming to hurt me!" the girl shouted.

Having watched everything angrily from the side, Sister Dingyi stepped forward and tried to slap Fang Renzhi's face. "Big bullying the small, shame on you!" she yelled. Fang Renzhi tried to block with his arm, but Dingyi extended her right arm quickly and grabbed his hand, and then pushed down on his

elbow with her left arm. If she gave a solid push, Fang Renzhi's arm would be broken instantly. Yu Canghai poked his finger at Dingyi's back. Dingyi had to let go of Fang Renzhi and strike back with her hand. Yu Canghai didn't want to fight with her, so he jumped back two steps and said, "Excuse me!"

Dingyi held the little girl's hand and asked gently, "Good child, where does it hurt? Let me have a look. I'll heal it for you." She felt the girl's arm but did not find any broken bones. That helped her relax a little. She rolled the girl's sleeve up. On the lovely white arm, four clear black finger marks could be easily seen. Dingyi's anger exploded.

"You liar!" she shouted at Fang Renzhi. "If your Master did not touch her arm at all, then who left the four black marks?"

"It was the turtle! It was the turtle!" the little girl said, pointing at Yu Canghai's back as she spoke.

Suddenly, everybody burst into loud laughter, and some even spit out the tea from their mouths; some laughed till they doubled over. Laughter filled the entire hall. Yu Canghai had no idea why everybody was laughing so hard. He thought that the little girl had called him a turtle just like any kid would have after they got upset. What was so funny about that? But seeing everyone laughing at him, he still felt quite embarrassed.

Fang Renzhi jumped forward and peeled a piece of paper off Yu Canghai's robe, then crumpled the paper into a ball. Yu Canghai took the paper ball and opened it, then saw a picture of a big turtle on the sheet. Embarrassed and anguished, Yu Canghai suddenly realized that it must have been a set up. The picture of the turtle was drawn ahead of time of course. It must have been the girl who cried and screamed to divert his attention, and then stuck the paper onto his back. It would be impossible for anybody else to play such a trick behind his back. If that was the case, then there must have been adults behind the scene. He turned around and glanced at Liu Zhengfeng, thinking, "This girl must be a member of the Liu household, so it was Liu Zhengfeng who played all these tricks on me."

Liu Zhengfeng saw the glance from Yu Canghai and immediately understood that Yu had placed the blame on him. He took a step forward.

“Little sister, where are you from? Where are your mom and dad?” he asked the little girl.

By asking these words, he wanted to first assure Yu Canghai that he had no clue as to what was going on, and also, he had become suspicious himself and wanted to know who had brought this little girl here.

“My mom and dad went away for something else,” the little girl muttered. “They told me to sit here and not go anywhere. They said that later there would be a good show; two guys would fly out and then lie still. They said this is the Qingcheng Sword School’s best move called ‘Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand.’ It was a good show indeed!”

She clapped her hands. The crystal teardrops on her cheeks had not yet dried out, but she was already smiling quite happily. No one could help but laugh at these words. These words were undoubtedly said to humiliate the Qingcheng Sword School. The two Qingcheng apprentices were still lying on the ground with their bottoms up, and each had a clear footprint on it. Qingcheng Sword School had really lost all face.

Yu Canghai struck one apprentice’s back, only to find that both apprentices had their acupoints sealed in exactly the same manner as Shen Renjun and Ji Rentong earlier. To unseal their acupoints would require quite some inner strength and quite some time. Now, not only was Mu Gaofeng staring at him fiercely, but another tough opponent was hiding close by; the smart thing to do would be not to waste any of his inner strength on unsealing the apprentices’ acupoints.

“Carry them out,” he whispered to Fang Renzhi. Fang Renzhi waved at several Qingcheng apprentices, who rushed out and carried the two out of the hall.

Out of the blue, the little girl said loudly, “Qingcheng Sword School really has a lot of people! One ‘Geese Landing in Sand’ takes two to carry. Two ‘Geese Landing in Sand’ takes four to carry.”

Yu Canghai's face turned livid with rage. "What's your dad's name?" he asked the little girl with a long face. "Did he teach you these words?"

He figured that since those words were really sarcastic, if it wasn't her parents who had taught her, she would never have said them at such a young and tender age. He then thought, "The name 'Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand' was made up by Linghu Chong; could it be that Huashan Sword School blames Renjie for killing Linghu Chong, and now wants to get even with the Qingcheng Sword School? The one who had sealed the acupoints had very high skills; could it be…could it be that the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, Yue Buqun, was playing tricks behind the scene?" When he thought that Yue Buqun had plotted against him, he couldn't help thinking, "That man's Kung Fu skills are outstanding. And since the five sword schools are united under the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, if they all start to attack, the Qingcheng Sword School would suffer a crushing defeat." At these thoughts, his face whitened with worry.

The little girl ignored Yu Canghai's question. Smiling merrily, she started reciting, "One times two is two; two times two is four; three times two is six; four times two is eight; five times two is ten…."

"I am asking you a question!" Yu Canghai yelled in a stern voice.

Her mouth twitching, the little girl started crying again while hiding her face in Sister Dingyi's arms. Dingyi patted her on the back gently and comforted her.

"Don't be scared. Don't be afraid! Good child, don't be scared." She turned to Yu Canghai. "Why are you scaring a kid like that?"

Yu Canghai let out a disgruntled snort. "So the Five Mountains Sword Alliance is against my Qingcheng Sword School now. I'd better be very careful," he thought to himself.

The little girl stuck her head out from under Dingyi's arms and grinned. "Granny, two times two is four; two of the Qingcheng Sword School 'Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand' will take four to carry. Three times two is six. Three 'Bum Bum Back, Geese Landing in Sand' will take six to carry. Four times

two is eight….” She did not continue, but starting giggling.

Such behavior in suddenly going from crying to all of a sudden smiling was more appropriate for a seven or eight year old child. Judging by her height, the girl looked to be thirteen or fourteen. Every word from her was designed to humiliate Yu Canghai somehow; people all thought those were definitely not the words from an innocent and sincere child; there was no doubt that someone must have been behind it all.

“A true man acts openly and aboveboard. Whichever friend wants to be hard on me, better show yourself. What kind of a hero are you if you only hide, sneak around, and direct a little child to utter such nonsense?” Yu Canghai bellowed loudly. Although he was short, the words were spoken using inner strength all the way down from his abdomen and echoed in everyone’s ears. People were shocked by the great energy Yu had put on display and stopped belittling him. The entire hall quieted down, and nobody answered.

After a while, the little girl suddenly spoke again. “Granny, he asked what kind of hero that was. Are the people of the Qingcheng Sword School heroes?”

Dingyi was a senior sister of the Heng-Shan Sword School. Although she was displeased with the Qingcheng Sword School, she wouldn’t just defame the entire school in public, so she answered vaguely, “The Qingcheng Sword School…the Qingcheng Sword School had many heroes in the last generation.”

“Then how about now? Are there any left?” The girl asked again.

Dingyi pouted her lips at Yu Canghai. “Why don’t you ask the Head Master Priest of the Qingcheng Sword School?” she said.

“Head Master Priest of the Qingcheng Sword School,” the girl said, “if someone was badly wounded and could not even move, then someone else came to bully him, is the second person who took advantage of the other’s precarious position a hero?”

Yu Canghai was shocked. “She is indeed from the Huashan Sword School!” he thought secretly.

People who had listened to Yilin recount the story of Luo Renjie killing Linghu Chong all felt a shock too. “Could this little girl be somebody related to the Huashan Sword School?”

Lao Denuo thought, “These words from the little girl are really all for defending Big Apprentice Brother against injustice. Who is she?” Afraid to upset the Little Apprentice Sister, he hadn’t been in a hurry to inform his fellow apprentices about the death of Big Apprentice Brother.

Yilin’s entire body started to tremble. She felt grateful toward the little girl. She had always wanted to ask Yu Canghai the same question, but being a gentle and kind girl who always respected the elders and seniors, she simply could not confront Yu Canghai, a senior. Now that the little girl had spoken them out for her, teardrops started to run down her cheeks.

“Who taught you to ask this?” Yu Canghai asked, lowering his voice.

The young girl ignored his question once again. “There was a guy named Luo Renjie. He was your apprentice, wasn’t he? When he saw someone badly wounded, and the badly wounded man was a very good person, not only didn’t he help him, he stabbed him with his sword. Was that Luo Renjie a true hero? Was that the kind of Qingcheng Sword School’s chivalrous virtue you taught him?”

These words were only coming out of the mouth of a little girl, but they were stated so clearly and logically, it was really overwhelming.

Yu Canghai did not know how to answer, so he asked sternly, “Who on earth is telling you to ask these questions of me? Is your father from the Huashan Sword School?”

The little girl turned around to ask Dingyi, “Granny, is his scaring a little girl the kind of deed from a proper hero or a true man?”

Dingyi sighed. “That, I don’t know.”

People in the hall became more and more surprised. Those words the little girl said before were probably taught by grownups, but the two questions she just

asked were really her own response, elicited from the manner of Yu Canghai's questioning. They showed clear criticism and were right to the point. How could one have expected her to be so sharp at such a young age?

Looking at the little girl through her blurring eyes, Yilin saw her slim back. Suddenly she realized, "I have seen this little sister before. Where have I seen her?" She thought for a while and then remembered. "Yes, she was also at the Huiyan Wine House yesterday." All the scenes from the previous day suddenly ran through her mind and became clearer and clearer.

The previous morning, when she was forced into Huiyan Wine House, there were many people sitting around seven or eight tables. Then the two from the Taishan Sword School challenged Tian Boguang and Tian Boguang killed one of them. By then most of the customers had been scared away, and the waiter dared not serve anyone anymore. But in the corner close to the street, a big, tall monk continued to sit by a small table. There were also two more people sitting at another small table. Throughout the time until Linghu Chong was killed, and she carried his body downstairs from the wine house, the monk and the other two never left. At that time, she was scared to death; with lots of things going through her mind, she simply did not care much about the giant monk and the other two. Now seeing the back view of the little girl and comparing it with the scene in her mind, she could clearly remember that the little girl was one of the two sitting by the small table in the wine house. She had her back to her at that time, so she only remembered her appearance from the rear. And she was wearing a yellow blouse then, not the green blouse she had on now. If the little girl had not turned around, she would never have remembered her.

But who was the other one? She could only remember that it was a man for sure. But was he old or young, and what kind of clothes was he dressed in? She could not remember anything. Also, she remembered seeing the monk pick up his bowl to drink his wine, and when Tian Boguang was tricked into admitting his failure, the monk had laughed loudly. The little girl was laughing too; her clear laughter seemed to be ringing in her ears again. It was surely her! Who was that giant monk? Why was a monk drinking wine?

Yilin was immersed in the memories of the previous day's scenes. It seemed as though Linghu Chong's smiling face had appeared in front of her eyes again: how he had tricked Luo Renjie into coming closer before his death; how he thrust his sword into the enemy's belly; how she carried Linghu Chong's body staggering down the stairs empty-minded, not knowing where she had been; how she absent-mindedly went out of the town gate and just walked about aimlessly…. She could feel the body in her arms getting colder and colder. She didn't feel his weight, didn't feel sad, nor know where she was going. Then, she came by a lotus pond where the lotus flowers were so bright and so beautiful. Then, her chest seemed as if it was struck by a big hammer, and she could not hold out any longer. She fell down together with Linghu Chong's body, and then passed out.

When she slowly regained consciousness, she felt bright sunshine blinding her eyes. She tried holding on to the body but missed. Jumping up in surprise, she found herself still by the lotus pond, with the beautiful lotus flowers just as before, but there was no sign of Linghu Chong's body. She was so panic-stricken that she rushed around the lotus pond several times, but still couldn't find any sign of where the body had gone. Seeing the bloodstains on her clothes, she knew it couldn't have been a bad dream. She almost passed out again, but she forced herself to calm down a little, and then searched around one more time. Still, the body seemed to have flown away on wings without a trace. The water in the lotus pond was quite shallow. She waded into the water and searched around; still, there wasn't a single trace. Then, she went back to Hengshan Town, asked for the location of the Liu House, and found her Master. But during all this time, she had being pondering, "Where did Big Brother Linghu's body go? Maybe someone passing by took it? Maybe it was dragged away by wild animals?" When she thought that he had lost his life saving her, but she couldn't even take good care of his body, she felt miserable. If the body really had been dragged away by wild animals and had already been eaten, she would kill herself. Actually, even if Linghu Chong's body were fine, she would rather not live anyway.

Suddenly, from deep within her heart, another thought popped up. That was a

thought she had never dared to think about. The thought had come to her several times through the day, but each time she immediately pushed it back and only thought, "How could I be so disturbed? How could I be thinking such nonsense? This is just absurd! No, it's not like that!" But now, she could not hide it any longer, and it appeared clearly in her mind: "When I carried Big Brother Linghu's body, I felt very calm and peaceful. I was actually feeling a bit happy, just like when I exercise chanting the Buddhist Scriptures with an empty mind. I seemed to have hoped to just hold his body and walk casually on a never-ending road that nobody else was on. I would pay any price to find his body. Why? Am I not able to bear the thought that wild animals ate his body? No! Not that at all! I just want to carry his body and walk around aimlessly, or just sit by the lotus pond quietly. Why did I faint? Oh, no, I am terrible! I should not be thinking like this. Master wouldn't allow it, and Buddha wouldn't tolerate it either. These are evil thoughts. I shouldn't be trapped by evil thoughts. But where is Big Brother Linghu's body?" Her mind was in such chaos. She could almost see the smile on Linghu Chong's lips once again. It was such a carefree smile. Then it changed into a disdainful look on his face when he swore, "You are bad luck, little nun!" She felt a pain from her chest like a knife cutting into her flesh….

Yu Canghai's voice rose again. "Lao Denuo, this little girl is from your Huashan Sword School, isn't she?"

"No. This is the first time I have seen this little sister. She is not from our sword school," Lao Denuo denied in a hurry.

"Sure. If you don't want to admit it, fine!" Yu Canghai did not believe him at all.

Suddenly Yu Canghai waved his hand. With a flash, an awl-shaped missile shot toward Yilin. "Little Sister, see what this is?" he yelled.

Yilin was still deep in her thoughts, and had never expected a projectile from Yu Canghai. She actually felt some kind of joy: "It is a relief that he is killing me. I don't feel like living anyway!" Seeing the missile flying closer, and hearing several people shouting, "Look out for that projectile!" she still had no

intention of dodging it. For some unknown reason, she felt unspeakable peace and joy, feeling that there was only sadness and endless loneliness in the living world. She would be very happy if the missile killed her.

Dingyi gently pushed the little girl aside and dashed in front of Yilin to block the missile. Although she had the look of an old Granny, the dash was extremely fast. The missile wasn't traveling that fast, but it was still a shooting projectile. Dingyi started later yet arrived earlier, and was able to get ready to catch the projectile. Just when it seemed that Sister Dingyi would catch the projectile without too much effort, the missile suddenly dropped to the floor about two feet away from her. Since Dingyi had already extended her arm to catch it, yet missed, it was like losing a bout in front of everyone. Her face turned slightly red.

Yu Canghai immediately waved his hand again and threw the paper ball toward the little girl's face. The paper ball was made out of the paper with the turtle picture.

"So the bull-nose shot the missile just to lure me away. He wasn't really trying to hurt Yilin," Dingyi thought to herself.

The small paper ball went much faster, and carried much more strength than the awl-shaped missile. Yu Canghai had used his inner strength when he threw the paper ball. If it hit the little girl's face, she would definitely get hurt.

Dingyi was standing next to Yilin. When she realized what had happened, it was already too late to help. All she could do was yelling, "You…!"

The little girl swiftly sat down on the floor and cried, "Mom, Mom, he wants to kill me." She moved very swiftly, and dodged the paper ball in perfect timing. Anyone could tell that she knew martial arts, but just acted like a spoiled child. Everyone thought it was quite funny. Yu Canghai also felt that it wouldn't be appropriate to push her any more. He had a belly full of suspicions, but none of his questions could be answered.

Seeing the embarrassed expression on Yu Canghai's face, Sister Dingyi couldn't help laughing inwardly. Since the Qingcheng Sword School had lost

face so badly, she didn't want to mess with him anymore, so she said to Yilin, "Yilin, I don't know where the little sister's parents went. Why don't you go with her to look for them, so she won't be bullied because nobody is looking out for her?"

"Yes, Master!" Yilin answered. She walked up to the little girl and took her hand. The girl smiled at her, and they walked out of the hall together.

Yu Canghai sneered and stopped paying any more attention to the girl. He turned around and stared at Mu Gaofeng.

Chapter 5: Healing

Translated by Lanny Lin



Linghu Chong slowly closed his eyes. His breathing gradually slowed down and soon he fell asleep. Yilin stayed by Linghu Chong's side, and gently whisked a leafy branch to drive away mosquitoes and other bugs for him

Yilin followed the girl outside. "What's your name?" she asked.

The girl gave a sly grin. "My last name is Linghu and my first name is Chong!"

Yilin's heart thumped. "I asked you politely, why are you making fun of me?"

She pulled a long face.

"What makes you think I'm making fun of you?" The girl kept grinning. "Do you think your friend is the only one who is called Linghu Chong?"

Yilin felt deep sorrow in her heart. She sighed and could no longer hold back her tears. "Big Brother Linghu was my savior," she said. "His death was my fault, I…I am not worthy to be his friend."

Just then, in the hallway outside, two hunchbacks hurried by. Yilin recognized them as the Hunchback of the North Mu Gaofeng, and Lin Pingzhi. The girl giggled.

"What are the odds! An old, ugly hunchback, together with a young, ugly hunchback."

Yilin was a bit annoyed by the girl's remarks. "Girl," she asked, "is it possible for you to find your mother and father by yourself? My head is beginning to hurt, and I'm not feeling very well right now."

The girl grinned. "I know you're faking a headache. You're just mad because I used Linghu Chong's name. My dear sis, your Master asked you to take care of me; are you abandoning me already? If some rascals pick on me again, your Master's going to blame you for sure!"

"You are much more capable than I am, and you're very smart too. Even the renowned Master Yu didn't know what to do with you. People are all thanking Buddha that you aren't the one picking on others. Who would dare bully you?" Yilin countered.

The girl burst into laughter. She held Yilin's hand and said, "Now you're the one making fun of me. If it weren't for your Master, that bull-nose would've beaten me up. Sis, my name is Qu Feiyan. My grandpa calls me Feifei; you can call me Feifei too."

Yilin felt a little better when the girl revealed her real name. But she also thought it was strange that the girl knew she was still thinking about Linghu Chong, and used his name to startle her. Maybe the clever and eccentric girl had

hidden outside the window and overheard her report to all the masters. “Well,” she said, “Miss Qu, let’s go find your mother and father then. Where do you think they might be?”

“I know where they went,” Qu Feiyan said. “If you want to look for them, you can go by yourself. I’m not going.”

“Why don’t you want to go?” Yilin asked in surprise.

“I am still too young; of course I don’t want to go. But you’re different, you’re so gloomy and depressed right now, maybe you’d prefer to go there early,” Qu Feiyan said.

Yilin’s heart thumped. “You mean your mother and father….”

“My parents were murdered by bad guys a long time ago. If you want to look for them, you’ll have to go to the underworld.”

Yilin was very vexed. “If your parents have passed away already, how can you still make fun of them? I am leaving!”

Qu Feiyan grabbed onto Yilin’s left hand and started to beg, “My dear sis, I don’t have anyone else. I’m always so lonely. Nobody plays with me. Please, please just stay a little bit longer!”

Yilin was moved by her words. “Well, alright,” she sighed, “I’ll stay with you a little longer. But you have to stop saying such nonsense. Also, I am a member of the Buddhist order, so it isn’t appropriate for you to call me sis.”

Qu Feiyan laughed. “You think I was just saying silly words, but I think they make perfect sense. Different people have different perspectives. You are older than me, so I should call you sis. What’s wrong with that? Sis Yilin! Why don’t you quit being a nun?”

Yilin was startled, and stepped back.

Qu Feiyan let go of her hand. “What’s so great about being a nun?” she asked. “You can’t eat fish, shrimp, chicken or duck, not to mention beef or lamb. Sis, you’re really very pretty. You don’t look so good right now because you shaved

your head,[37] but once you grow a nice long head of beautiful hair back, you'll be a real babe!"

Yilin could tell that Qu Feiyan was speaking from her heart, so she smiled. "I am already a member of the Buddhist clergy. We believe in the doctrine of the Four Emptiness; why would I care whether my outer husk is beautiful or ugly?"

Qu Feiyan turned her head toward Yilin and looked at Yilin's face carefully. It had just stopped raining, and dark clouds started drifting away slowly. Moonlight streamed through the opening at an angle and illuminated Yilin's face with a pale silver glow, which made her face even more beautiful. Qu Feiyan gave a sigh.

"Sis, you are so beautiful," she said slowly, "no wonder he thinks about you so much."

Yilin's face became flushed. "What are you talking about?" she exclaimed uncomfortably. "If you keep making fun of me, I am going to leave."

"Alright! I'll stop," Qu Feiyan said with a smile. "Sis, can you give me some 'Heavenly Connecting Glue?' I need to save someone."

"Who are you saving?" Yilin asked in surprise.

"He's a very important person, but I can't tell you who he is yet." Qu Feiyan grinned.

"I really should give you the medicine if you need it to save somebody's life," Yilin said, "but my Master told us that the making of the 'Heavenly Connecting Glue' is not easy, and we have been ordered not to use it if the wounded person is unworthy."

"Sis," Qu Feiyan said, "if somebody cursed your Master and your Heng-Shan Sword School, would he be worthy or unworthy?"

"If he cursed my Master and our Heng-Shan Sword School, of course he would be unworthy, how could he be any good?"

"That's really very interesting," Qu Feiyan mused slyly. "There's this guy who

once said again and again that he would have really bad luck after seeing nuns, and would lose all his bets. He abused you, your Master, and the entire Heng-Shan Sword School. If such an unworthy fellow got wounded….”

Before she even finished speaking, Yilin had already turned around and stridden away angrily. Qu Feiyan jumped in front of her, arms outstretched and blocking Yilin’s way. She kept smiling but had no intention of letting Yilin pass.

A thought suddenly struck Yilin. “Yesterday at the Huiyan Wine House, this girl sat with a man throughout the entire incident, until Big Brother Linghu was murdered. When I carried his body down the stairs, she was still sitting there. She must have seen the whole thing; there’s no need for her to eavesdrop on what I said at all. Could she have followed me all the way?” She wanted to ask the girl an important question, but could not make herself speak the words. Yilin could only blush with embarrassment.

“Sis, I know you want to ask me, ‘Where did Big Brother Linghu’s body go?’ Am I right?” Qu Feiyan grinned.

“Yes, would you please tell me? I…I would really appreciate it!” Yilin pleaded.

“I don’t know, but there’s someone who does. However, he’s badly wounded and could die any minute now. If you can save him using the ‘Heavenly Connecting Glue,’ he might be able to tell you where Big Brother Linghu’s body is.”

“You don’t know yourself?” Yilin asked.

“If I, Qu Feiyan, know where Linghu Chong’s dead body is, may Heaven let me die a terrible death by Yu Canghai’s sword tomorrow!”

“I believe you. You don’t have to vow,” Yilin said hurriedly. “So who is this person?”

“It’s up to you if you want to save his life or not. And the place we’re going to isn’t such a good place either.”

In order to find Linghu Chong’s body, even a hill of knives or a forest of

swords would not stop Yilin from going, much less something like “not a good place.” Yilin nodded, “Let’s go,” and they marched towards the gate.

It was still raining outside. There were some oilpaper-umbrellas propped against the wall beside the gate. Yilin and Qu Feiyan each took one and walked out towards the northeast corner of the city. It was already late at night, and there was hardly anybody in the street. When they walked by, a couple of dogs in the deep alleys barked at them. All Yilin could think about was where to find Linghu Chong’s body, so even though Qu Feiyan led her through many remote little streets, she did not care. After they walked for quite a while, Qu Feiyan entered a very narrow alley. A small red lantern stuck out from a door on the left side of the street. Qu Feiyan knocked on the door three times. Someone approached from the courtyard within, opened the door, and stuck his head out. Qu Feiyan whispered something in the man’s ear and stuck something into his hands.

“Sure, sure! Come in please, Misses!” the man said.

Qu Feiyan turned back and motioned to Yilin, who followed her through the doorway. The man had a surprised look on his face upon seeing Yilin, but still hurried ahead to lead the way. After they walked through the courtyard, they arrived at a room in the east side of the building. The man parted the curtain door.

“Miss, Sister, through here please,” he said.

The scent of perfume filled the entire room. Yilin walked in and saw a huge bed in the room. Exotic silk quilts and pillows covered the bed. They were decorated with Xiang[38] Embroidery, one of the greatest arts of its type in the world. A pair of love birds playing in the water was embroidered on the cover of the red silk quilt. It was made with very bright colors and the ducks seemed very lifelike. Yilin had been cloistered in the White-Cloud Nunnery since she was very little. The quilt she used was very simple, made with gray cloth. She had never seen such a gorgeous bed set in her entire life. She glanced at it, and immediately turned her head away. A big red candle was placed on the small

table next to the bed; a mirror and a makeup box sat neatly by the red candle; two pairs of exotic slippers lay on the floor side by side near the bed – a pair for a man and a pair for a woman. Yilin felt a sudden shock when she raised her head and saw a shy face, red with embarrassment, and looking surprised. Then she realized that it was only her own reflection in the mirror.

The sound of footsteps came from behind them. What appeared to be a maid walked in with a big smile and began serving tea. She wore very tight clothes and she behaved quite coquettishly.

Yilin felt more and more uneasy. "What is this place?" she whispered to Qu Feiyan.

Qu Feiyan grinned and then whispered something to the maid.

"Sure!" The woman covered up the smile on her lips with her hand and walked out slowly.

"That woman is bumbling! She can't be very honest!" Yilin thought to herself.

"Why did you bring me here? What is this place?" she asked Qu Feiyan again.

"This is a very famous spot in the town of Hengshan. It's called the Jade House," Qu Feiyan said with a broad grin.

"What is this Jade House?"

"The Jade House is the best brothel in town."

When Yilin heard the word "brothel," her heart skipped a beat, and she almost fainted. When she saw the way the room was decorated, she already had a feeling that something was not quite right, but she did not expect to be in a brothel at all. Although she did not really understand what a brothel was, she had heard from the secular apprentice-sisters that prostitutes were the most lewd of women; they would consort with any man who had enough money.

"Did Qu Feiyan bring me here to be one of them?" She was so shocked and worried that she almost burst into tears.

A man's loud laughter exploded from the room next door. The voice sounded

very familiar, and before long, Yilin recognized it as the voice of the villain, "Ten Thousand Miles Loner" Tian Boguang. Yilin's legs gave out on her; she collapsed into a chair, her face frightened and pale.

"What's wrong?" Qu Feiyan was startled and rushed over to check on her.

"It's Tian…Tian Boguang!" Yilin whispered.

"That's right, I recognized his voice too. It's your cute little apprentice Tian Boguang." Qu Feiyan grinned.

"Who's saying my name?" Tian Boguang shouted loudly from the next room.

"Hey, Tian Boguang," Qu Feiyan yelled, "your Master's here. Come here quickly and kowtow to your Master!"

Tian Boguang became enraged. "What Master, you little bitch? You're just babbling. Keep at it, and I'm going to bust open your stinking mouth."

"Isn't it true that you swore to take little sister Yilin of the Heng-Shan Sword School as your Master at the Huiyan Wine House? She is right here. Hurry up, and get over here!" Qu Feiyan urged.

"How could she *possibly* be in a place like this?" Tian Boguang exclaimed. "Huh, how…how did you know? Who are you? I am going to kill you!" A trace of fear could actually be heard in his blustering voice.

"Come here and kowtow to your Master first," Qu Feiyan said airily.

"No, no! Don't let him come over!" Yilin hurriedly objected.

Tian Boguang let out a cry in shock, and then came a loud "thump," as he apparently jumped to the floor from his bed.

"Sir! What are you doing?" a woman's voice inquired.

"Tian Boguang," Qu Feiyan shouted, "don't you run away! Your Master's here to settle a score with you."

"What damn master or apprentice?" Tian Boguang retorted. "I was tricked by that Linghu Chong! If that little nun comes one step closer, I'll kill her in a blink!"

“Fine! I am not going over. And you don’t come here either!” Yilin said in a trembling voice.

“Tian Boguang,” Qu Feiyan yelled, “you’re supposed to be a somebody in the Martial World, why don’t you be a man? Are you backing out of your promise? Come over here and kowtow to your Master!”

Tian Boguang snorted, but did not say another word.

“I don’t want him to kowtow; I don’t want to see him either. He…he is not my apprentice,” Yilin said.

Tian Boguang jumped in immediately, “See! The little Sister doesn’t want to see me at all!”

“Fine,” Qu Feiyan said, “have it your way, but when we came here earlier, we were followed by a couple of little sneaks. You’d better go and get rid of them fast. Your master and I are resting here. You can keep guard outside, and keep people from bothering us. If you do your job well, then maybe I won’t mention your agreeing to be the little Sister’s apprentice to anyone. Otherwise, I’ll just announce it to the entire world!”

Tian Boguang raised his voice and gave a sudden shout, “You sneaking little punks, you’ve got a lot of nerve!”

A window opened with a bang, followed by the clang of two weapons falling atop the roof; then someone screamed in pain, while the footsteps of someone else running away could be heard. Again came the sound of a window opening with a bang as Tian Boguang leaped down the roof back to his room.

“Killed one, a little skulker from the Qingcheng Sword School. The other one ran away,” he declared.

“You’re hopeless! How could you let one get away?” Qu Feiyan complained.

“I couldn’t kill that one,” Tian Boguang explained hurriedly. “She…she was a nun of the Heng-Shan Sword School.”

“So it was your Uncle-Master! Of course you couldn’t kill her.” Qu Feiyan giggled.

Yilin was astonished. She murmured, “Was that my apprentice sister? What do I do now?”

“Hey, little girl, what’s your name?” Tian Boguang asked.

Grinning, Qu Feiyan said, “You shouldn’t ask questions like that. If you keep your mouth shut, your Master will put the business of settling her score on hold for now.”

Tian Boguang shut up immediately.

“Qu, let’s leave here quickly!” Yilin said urgently.

“But you haven’t seen the patient yet,” Qu Feiyan insisted. “Didn’t you have something to ask him? But if you’re afraid of making your Master unhappy, and want to go back, that’s fine with me.”

“Well, I am already here anyway, let’s…let’s go see him,” Yilin said after thinking for a moment.

Qu Feiyan smiled and walked toward the side of the bed. She pushed the wall on the east side of the room, and a secret door opened silently. Qu Feiyan waved at Yilin, motioning her to follow, and then walked through the door. Yilin felt that the whole business with the brothel was getting more and more mysterious. Thank Heavens that Tian Boguang was in the room on the west side. She figured the further she was from him the better, so she gathered her strength and followed Qu in. There was another room inside, but no light. With the illumination from outside, she could tell it was a small room. There was also a bed in it, shrouded by a curtain. She could vaguely see that somebody was lying on the bed behind the curtain. Yilin stopped at the secret door but was afraid to go in.

“Sis, go ahead, help him with your ‘Heavenly Connecting Glue’!” Qu Feiyan directed.

“He…he really knows where Big Brother Linghu’s body is?” Yilin asked in hesitation.

“Maybe he does, maybe he doesn’t. I don’t know.”

“But you said earlier that he did know.” Yilin was frustrated.

“I’m not a gentleman; I don’t have to keep my words. If you want to help him, get to work, otherwise, just turn around and leave. Nobody’s going to stop you,” Qu Feiyan snapped.

“No matter what the cost is, I need to find Big Brother Linghu’s body even if there is only a slim chance, I can’t let it pass,” Yilin thought to herself. “Alright, I will work on him,” she declared.

She went back to the main room to get the candle, and then walked back into the small room and stopped beside the bed. She opened the curtain and saw a man lying on the bed. A green handkerchief covered his face. When he breathed in and out, the cloth moved as well. Not being able to see his face actually gave Yilin a bit of comfort.

“Where is he wounded?” she turned and asked.

“His chest. The wound is very deep; it barely missed his heart,” Qu Feiyan answered.

Yilin gently lifted the thin blanket covering his chest. A large wound could be seen right in the middle of his bare chest. It had stopped bleeding, but since the gash was so deep, the man was still in critical condition. Yilin calmed herself a little and thought, “No matter what it takes, I have to save his life.” She passed the candle to Qu Feiyan, and took the wooden box containing the “Heavenly Connecting Glue” out of her pocket. After opening the box, she put it on the table at the side of the bed and then gently pressed down around the edge of the wound.

“All the acupoints that help to stop bleeding have already been sealed. Otherwise he would be dead by now,” Qu Feiyan said in a low voice.

Yilin nodded. All the acupoints around the wound had already been properly sealed, and was done much better than what she could have achieved by herself. She slowly removed the cotton padding that covered the wound. Once the padding was removed, blood gushed out. Yilin had learned how to treat wounds from her seniors. She pressed down on the wound with her left hand, and

applied the “Heavenly Connecting Glue” to the wound with her right hand. When she finished, she immediately put the cotton padding back onto the wound. “Heavenly Connecting Glue” was the Heng-Shan Sword School’s treasured poultice, prepared from a secret recipe. Once applied to wounds, it would stop the bleeding in short order. Yilin could hear the man breathing heavily. She wasn’t sure if he would survive, so she couldn’t resist but to ask the question.

“Sir, I have something to ask you, please give me an answer.”

Suddenly, Qu Feiyan tilted her body to the side. The candlestick tilted to the side as well, and the flame suddenly went out. Darkness swept the entire room.

“Oops!” Qu Feiyan let out a cry. “The light went out.”

It was so dark in the room that Yilin could not even see her own fingers. She became quite flustered. “How can a member of the Buddhist order remain in such an unsavory place? I need to leave here as soon as I find out where Big Brother Linghu’s body is,” she thought. With a trembling voice, she asked.

“Sir, are you feeling a little better now?”

The man let out a groan but did not answer her question.

“He’s running a fever. Feel his forehead, it’s burning hot!” Qu Feiyan exclaimed.

Before Yilin even had a chance to answer, her right hand was already caught by Qu Feiyan and placed on top of the man’s forehead. Apparently, Qu Feiyan had removed the green handkerchief that covered the man’s face earlier. Yilin felt as if her fingers were touching burning coal; she couldn’t help but feel pity for him.

“I also have medicine to take orally. I’d better administer it,” she said. “Qu, will you please light the candle?”

“Sure, you wait here. I’ll go find some flints.”

Hearing that Feiyan was leaving, Yilin became very nervous. She grabbed onto Feiyan’s sleeve.

“No, no, don’t leave. What am I suppose to do here alone?”

Qu Feiyan let out a small laugh. “Go ahead and take out the medicine,” she said.

Yilin took out a bottle from her pocket, opened the bottle and dumped three pills out onto her palm. “I have the pills. You give them to him,” she said.

“Better not drop the pills in the dark. This concerns somebody’s life; it’s no joke. Sis, if you are afraid to be left here alone, then I’ll stay here, you go find the flints,” Qu Feiyan proposed.

Yilin was even more frightened about the idea of wandering around the brothel all by herself. “No, no, I am not going,” she cried out immediately.

“Once you decide to save somebody, you’ve got to follow through. You can just put the pills in his mouth and then give him some tea to help him swallow. In the dark, he can’t see who you are. What are you so afraid of? Here, here’s the tea cup, be careful, don’t drop it,” Qu Feiyan said.

Slowly reaching out with her hand, Yilin took the tea. Pausing, she thought to herself, “Master has always told us that as Buddhists we should always be merciful to others. Saving a life achieves more than building a seven-story pagoda for Buddha. Even if this man doesn’t know where Big Brother Linghu’s body is, he is on the verge of dying, and I should still try to save his life.” So she slowly extended her right hand. When the back of her hand touched the man’s forehead, she turned her hand over and placed three “White Cloud Bear Gallbladder Pills” into his mouth. He swallowed them with the tea served by Yilin and then murmured something that seemed to be words of gratitude.

“Sir, I know you are wounded badly, I really should let you rest, but I have one urgent thing to ask you. Hero Linghu Chong was murdered, his body…,” Yilin said.

“You…you are asking for Linghu Chong…?” the man croaked.

“Yes! Do you know where hero Linghu Chong’s body is?” Yilin asked anxiously.

The man mumbled some words, but his voice was too low for Yilin to make anything out of them. Yilin asked one more time, and then moved her ear close to the man's lips, but all she could hear was his heavy breathing. It seemed that he wanted to say something but could not make the words come out.

Yilin suddenly remembered. The "Heavenly Connecting Glue" and "White Cloud Bear Gallbladder Pills" were wonderful treatments for wounds, but they were both very strong medicines as well, particularly the "White Cloud Bear Gallbladder Pill." Anyone would pass out for a half day after taking it. It was just an important step of the healing process. How could she be so self absorbed as to push him to talk at that moment? She sighed gently and moved out from under the curtain and sat down on a chair near the bed.

"I'll wait till he feels better and then ask again," she murmured to herself.

"Sis, is he going to be alright?" Qu Feiyan asked.

"I hope he will recover, but the wound on his chest is really deep. Qu, who… who is he?" Yilin asked. But Qu Feiyan did not answer.

"My grandpa said you couldn't let a lot of things go," Qu Feiyan said after a while. "You really shouldn't be a nun."

"Your grandpa knows me?" Yilin asked in surprise. "How does he…he know that I cannot let things go?"

"Yesterday in the Huiyan Wine House, Grandpa and I were watching your fight with Tian Boguang."

"Ah," Yilin said, "so your grandpa was the one sitting with you?"

"Yeah." Qu Feiyan smiled. "Your Big Brother Linghu really had a quick tongue. When he said he was the second best at fighting while sitting down, Grandpa actually believed him and thought he really knew some kind of sword art he created while in the toilet that could defeat Tian Boguang. Ha-ha."

Yilin could not see her face in the dark, but she could imagine that the little girl must be giggling quite hard. The more gleeful Qu Feiyan was the more sorrow Yilin felt.

Qu Feiyan went on, "Later, after Tian Boguang ran away, Grandpa said he had

no guts. He had promised to be your apprentice, and should have kowtowed to you and called you Master. How could he go back on his word?"

"Big Brother Linghu only tricked him to save my life, he did not really win the fight," Yilin explained.

"Sis, you are truly kind. After the way Tian Boguang treated you, you're still making excuses for him. Anyway, after Big Brother Linghu was killed, you just carried his body and wandered around with no specific destination. Grandpa said, 'This little nun is really a passionate girl. I am afraid she is going to go insane. Let's follow her and watch.' So the two of us followed behind you and watched how you just carried his body and didn't want to let him go. Grandpa said, 'Feifei, see how upset this little nun is. If this lad Linghu Chong weren't dead, the little nun would definitely give up the nunnery and marry him.'"

Yilin flushed with great embarrassment. She could feel her face and ears burning in the dark.

"Sis, was my grandpa right?"

"He died because of me," Yilin said. "I really wish I was the one who died instead of him. If Buddha pities me, and lets me die in exchange for Big Brother Linghu's life, I…I…even if I had to fall all the way to the bottom of the eighteenth level of hell and never be reborn again,[39] I would not complain." Her voice was filled with sincerity as she said those words.

All of a sudden, the man on the bed let out a groan.

"He…he is awake. Qu, would you please ask him if he feels better?" Yilin said happily.

"Why do I have to be the one to ask? Don't you have a tongue of your own?" Qu Feiyan demanded.

Yilin walked to the bed after a slight hesitation, and with the curtain in between them, asked, "Sir, are you…?" Before she could finish, the man let out several more groans.

"He is in great pain right now, I shouldn't bother him," she thought, so she just

stood there quietly. The man's breathing gradually fell into a slow rhythm. Apparently the medicine was doing its job, and he had fallen asleep again.

"Sis," Qu Feiyan whispered, "why would you die for Linghu Chong? Do you really like him that much?"

"No, no! Miss Qu, I am a Buddhist nun. Please don't say such disrespectful words to Buddha! Big Brother Linghu and I had never met each other before, but he gave his life to save mine. I…I just feel I owe him so much!" Yilin said breathlessly.

"What if he was alive again? Would you be willing to do anything for him?"

"Yes, even if I had to die a thousand times for him, I would have no complaints."

Qu Feiyan suddenly raised her voice and said, "Big Brother Linghu, listen up, sis Yilin said it herself…."

"Don't joke about it!" Yilin cut her off angrily.

Qu Feiyan simply ignored her and continued in a loud voice. "She said: if you are not dead, she would do anything for you."

From Qu's tone, Yilin could feel that she really wasn't joking. Her heart started pounding faster and faster, and she also began to get dizzy. She could only murmur, "You…you…" Within seconds, Qu Feiyan lit a candle. She opened the curtain and beckoned Yilin over with a big smile on her face. Yilin slowly walked to the bed full of dread. Suddenly, it seemed as if the entire world started swirling around her; she found herself falling down to the ground.

Qu Feiyan quickly caught her by the shoulder before she actually hit the floor.

"I know this is going to be a big surprise! Go ahead and see who he is!" she exclaimed.

"He…he…." Yilin's voice was so weak, and she could hardly breathe. Although the man on the bed had his eyes shut tightly, with his thick eyebrows and thin lips on a long rectangular face, Yilin immediately recognized him. It was none other than the one who had fought at the Huiyan Wine House, Linghu

Chong.

Yilin grabbed Qu Feiyan's arm tightly. "He…he is not dead?" she asked in a trembling voice.

"He is not dead yet, but if your medicine doesn't work, he'll die soon." Qu Feiyan smiled gently.

"He won't die, he definitely won't die! He…he is alive!" Filled with surprise and happiness, the emotions overwhelmed Yilin, and she started crying.

"Hey, he's not dead, what are you crying for?" Qu Feiyan asked curiously.

Yilin felt her legs giving out on her, so she had to lean on the bed as she continued to shed more tears.

"I am so happy!" she said. "Qu, I don't know how to thank you enough! You saved…saved Big Brother Linghu."

"Hey, you saved him. I don't have the skills to save him, and I don't have 'Heavenly Connecting Glue' either!" Qu Feiyan said.

Suddenly, Yilin understood. She stood up slowly and held Qu Feiyan's hand. "Your grandpa did it. It was your grandpa!"

Someone shouted outside, "Yilin, Yilin!" That was the voice of Sister Dingyi. Yilin was astounded, and was just about to answer when Qu Feiyan blew out the candle in her hands and then covered Yilin's mouth.

"Don't you remember what kind of a place this is? Don't answer!" she hissed at Yilin.

Yilin found herself bewildered. It was quite embarrassing being in a brothel, but refusing to answer her Master's call, that was something she had never done before in her life.

Dingyi's voice rang out, "Tian Boguang, get your ass out here! Let Yilin go!"

Tian Boguang's laughter came from the westside room. "Well! If it isn't the White-Cloud Nunnery Senior Sister Dingyi of the Heng-Shan Sword School!" he continued cackling for a few moments, and then finally spoke. "I really

should go out to pay my respects, but to leave all these cute ladies here on my bed alone wouldn't be good manners either. I guess I'll just stay here then. Ha-ha, ha-ha!" The coquettish laughter of several girls joined in. Obviously the women were prostitutes. "Sweetheart, don't pay any attention to her. Give me another kiss…," one of them said huskily. The lascivious voices of the women grew louder and louder. Tian Boguang must have egged them on to keep Sister Dingyi away.

Dingyi was outraged. "Tian Boguang, if you don't get your ass out here, I will cut you into ten thousand pieces!" she shouted.

Tian Boguang laughed. "If I don't get my ass out, you'll cut me into pieces. If I do haul my ass out, you'll cut me into pieces just as well. I guess I'd better keep my ass put. Sister Dingyi, you nuns really shouldn't be in places like this. Why don't you go back to your nice convent? Your apprentice is not here. She is a model nun who always follows all the convent rules. Why would she come here? Don't you think it's rather bizarre for your holiness to come here to look for your apprentice?"

Dingyi exploded. "Blazes! I'm going to set this damn place on fire! We'll see how long he can stay in there!" she retorted.

Tian Boguang laughed again. "Sister Dingyi, this spot is named the 'Jade House,' and it is one of the most famous sites in the town of Hengshan. I suppose it would be no big deal if you set it on fire, but when the story gets out, everybody'll know that it was Sister Dingyi from the White-Cloud Nunnery of the Heng-Shan Sword School who burnt down the 'Jade House' brothel in Hengshan. People who hear this would ask themselves, 'Sister Dingyi is a respectful senior Sister, why would she go to such a filthy place?' The answer would be that, 'She went there to look for her apprentice!' People who hear this would have to ask, 'Why did the apprentice of the Heng-Shan Sword School go to the Jade House?'…I'm guessing that all these questions wouldn't do the reputation of your school any good. Let me tell you something, Tian Boguang fears nothing and nobody in this entire world except that apprentice of yours. I'd be busy running away at the sight of her. How would I be able to bother

her?”

Dingyi reluctantly saw his point, but an apprentice had reported that she saw Yilin walking into this house with her own eyes, and Tian Boguang had also attacked her. There could have been no mistake. Her anger kept growing, but the only thing she could do was to stamp the flagstones beneath her feet.

“Tian Boguang, did you murder my apprentice Peng Renqi?” demanded a voice from the roof across the way. The Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School had arrived.

“Aha! Even the respectful Head Master of Qingcheng Sword School has come to visit,” Tian Boguang crowed. “Hengshan Jade House is going to be so appallingly famous from now on. They’ll never need to worry about getting business again! I did kill a fellow. His sword skills were ordinary, but seemed to be the moves of the Qingcheng Sword School. But as to whether his name was Peng Renqi or not, sorry, I really didn’t have the time to ask.”

Within the space of a blink, Yu Canghai leapt into Tian Boguang’s room, and a shower of ringing steel followed; Yu Canghai had started fighting with Tian Boguang. Sister Dingyi stood on the roof and listened to the sound of clashing weapons.

“That rascal Tian Boguang really has some skills,” she thought to herself. “His quick knife strokes seem to be evenly matched with the sword thrusts from the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School.”

Suddenly there was a loud “bang” followed by absolute silence. Yilin held onto Qu Feiyan’s hand tightly; cold sweat soaked her palms. She had no idea who had won the fight, Tian or Yu? Tian Boguang had bullied her several times, and she should have wished for Yu Canghai to win, but deep in her heart, she was really hoping the opposite. It would be better if Yu Canghai and her Master were to just leave, so that Linghu Chong could rest and heal peacefully and quietly. He was already on the brink of death, and if Yu Canghai were to rush into the room, the stress itself would surely cause his wounds to break open and kill him.

Tian Boguang's voice rose from afar, "Master Yu, don't you think it's a little crowded in this room? Let's go to the clearing in the field and fight a couple hundred rounds and see who the better man is! If you win, I'll relinquish this cute hottie 'Little Jade' to you! But if you lose, this chick will have to be mine!"

Yu Canghai almost exploded in anger. The scoundrel's words had implied that they were fighting to gain the favor of a whore named "Little Jade" in the "Jade House." He considered his situation. When they were fighting inside the room, over fifty bouts passed in no time. Tian Boguang's knife moves were well organized and balanced in both attack and defense. His skills were really no less than that of his own. Even if they were to fight another couple of hundred rounds, he still couldn't ensure victory would be his.

Everything quieted down. Yilin could even hear her own heartbeat. She leaned closer to Qu's ear and asked in a whisper, "Do you think…they will come in here?"

Qu was actually much younger than her, yet Yilin was completely helpless in such an embarrassing situation. Qu did not answer, and just covered Yilin's mouth with her hand.

Liu Zhengfeng's voice suddenly rose. "Master Yu, the villain Tian Boguang has committed so many crimes; he definitely won't come to a good end. We'll get him eventually. There's no rush right now. This brothel has been the source of much immoral behavior; I have always wanted to trash it. Please let me handle this. Danian, Weiyi, Let's search inside. Don't let anybody leave!"

Xiang Danian and Mi Weiyi, the two apprentices of Liu House, acknowledged the command in unison. Dingyi also sent out orders and had her apprentices surround the brothel.

Yilin became increasingly worried. She could hear the voices of the apprentices from the Liu House coming closer and closer, searching room after room. Liu Zhengfeng and Yu Canghai stood by the side and directed the apprentices. Loud cries from the proprietors could be clearly heard while they were thrashed by Xiang Danian, Mi Weiyi, and the rest of the apprentices.

Apprentices of the Qingcheng Sword School began smashing furniture, teacups and wine kettles, leaving a trail of destruction behind them. Knowing that all those people would soon arrive, Yilin became so worried that she almost passed out.

"My Master came to rescue me," she thought, "and I did not answer her call. I am in a brothel and in the same room with Big Brother Linghu late at night. Even though he is badly wounded, when all those guys from the Hengshan Sword School and the Qingcheng Sword School come in all at once, I wouldn't be able to explain the situation even if I had a hundred tongues. The reputation of the Heng-Shan Sword School would undoubtedly be damaged and how… how can I face my Master and all the apprentice sisters again?" She drew her sword and brought the blade toward her own throat.

Qu Feiyan heard the sound of a sword unsheathing and instantly realized what Yilin was doing. She grasped Yilin's wrist quickly.

"Stop! Let's dash out together," she whispered.

Sounds of movement came from the bed. Linghu Chong had sat up.

"Light the candle!" he whispered.

"Why?" Qu Feiyan asked.

"I am telling you to light the candle!" Linghu Chong said. His voice had a tone of authority in it. Qu Feiyan did not say another word and lit the candle.

With the light of the candle, Yilin could see Linghu Chong's white and bloodless face, a face that looked almost like that of a corpse. She uttered a cry.

Linghu Chong pointed at his overcoat at the end of the bed.

"Put that over…over my shoulders," he said.

While trembling like a falling leaf in a storm, Yilin picked up the overcoat and draped it over Linghu Chong's shoulders. Linghu Chong pulled the front of the overcoat so that it covered all the bloodstains and the wound on his chest.

"You two, lie on the bed," he said.

“This is fun!” Qu Feiyan giggled. She dragged Yilin and they slipped under the quilt.

By then, the people outside had noticed the candlelight in the room. “Let’s check that room out!” someone shouted. They all started to head toward the small room.

Linghu Chong took a deep breath, rushed to close the door, and locked it with a wooden bar. He walked back to the bed and lifted the curtain.

“Hide under the quilt!” he ordered.

“Don’t…don’t move too much. Watch out for your wounds,” Yilin begged.

Linghu Chong stuck his left hand out and pushed her head under the quilt while pulling Qu’s long hair out from under the quilt and spreading it all over the pillow. Just that simple movement caused his wound to break open, and blood gushed out again. He lost the strength in his legs and had to sit on the bed.

Someone had already started knocking on the door heavily and it sounded like he was beating a drum. “You son of a turtle, open the door!” one of them shouted. Then with a loud cracking sound, the door was kicked open and four people rushed in.

The leading person was none other than the Qingcheng apprentice Hong Renxiong. Astonished to see Linghu Chong, he immediately jumped back several paces.

“Linghu…It’s Linghu Chong….” he muttered.

Xiang Danian and Mi Weiyi had never met Linghu Chong before, but had both heard that Luo Renjie had killed him. So when they heard Hong Renxiong shouting out Linghu Chong’s name both were shocked and also stepped back. Everyone had his eyes wide open and just gazed at Linghu Chong.

Linghu Chong stood up slowly. “You…this many people….” he muttered.

“Linghu…Linghu Chong, you’re…you’re not dead?” Hong Renxiong murmured.

“How can I die so easily?” Linghu Chong answered coldly.

Yu Canghai stepped forward. “You are Linghu Chong? Excellent, excellent!” he said. Linghu Chong glanced at him but did not answer.

“What are you doing in this brothel?” Yu Canghai demanded.

Linghu Chong began laughing loudly. “Are you kidding me? What do you think people do in brothels?”

“I’ve heard that the Huashan Sword School has very strict school rules,” Yu Canghai said coldly. “You are the senior apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, the best student of ‘Gentleman Sword’ Mr. Yue, yet you sneak up here to sleep with prostitutes. Very funny! How very ironic!”

“Whatever rules the Huashan Sword School has,” Linghu Chong said, “that’s our own business. No need for you or anybody else to worry about it.”

Yu Canghai was an experienced person. Seeing Linghu Chong’s extremely white face because of blood loss, and his trembling legs, he could tell that Linghu Chong had been wounded badly. Could it be a trap? Then he thought, “The little nun of the Heng-Shan Sword School said this guy was killed by Renjie, but he is actually still alive. Obviously the little nun was lying to cover things up. During her tale, she called him Big Brother Linghu this and Big Brother Linghu that, so full of tenderness; maybe they have already become a couple. Someone saw the little nun coming to this brothel, but now no one can find her; most likely this guy has hidden her somewhere. Hmm! The Five Mountains Sword Alliance always considered themselves the true Martial Arts academies, and looked down upon my Qingcheng Sword School. If I can sort that little nun out, then not only would the reputation of the Huashan Sword School and the Heng-Shan Sword School be trashed, the entire Five Mountains Sword Alliance would also be humiliated, and they would never be able to flaunt themselves in the Martial World again!” He looked around quickly but did not see anyone else besides Linghu Chong. “Looks like that little nun is hiding in the bed,” he concluded.

“Renxiong! Lift open the bed curtain. Let’s find out what kind of show we

have in the bed," he said to Hong Renxiong.

"Yes, Master!" Hong Renxiong answered and then stepped forward. With his previous unpleasant encounter with Linghu Chong still fresh in his mind, he couldn't help glancing at Linghu Chong and hesitating.

"Do you want to die?" Linghu Chong threatened.

Hong Renxiong choked, but reassured by the presence of his master, he felt better and drew his sword.

"What do you want?" Linghu Chong asked Yu Canghai.

"The Heng-Shan Sword School lost a female apprentice; someone saw her in this brothel, so we need to search here," Yu Canghai demanded.

"This is the Five Mountains Sword Alliance's own matter. Why doesn't the Qingcheng Sword School mind its own business?" Linghu Chong mocked.

"We will find an answer today, whether you like it or not! Renxiong, go for it!" Yu Canghai ordered.

"Yes sir!" Hong Renxiong held his sword out and used the blade to lift the bed curtain.

Yilin and Qu Feiyan held on to each other as they hid under the quilt; they heard every word between Linghu Chong and Yu Canghai loudly and clearly. Greatly worried, they could not help trembling. Then when they heard the sound of Hong Renxiong lifting the bed curtain, both were frightened to death.

After Hong Renxiong had lifted up the bed curtain, everyone stared at the bed. There was a large red silk quilt with two love birds embroidered on it. Obviously there was someone under the quilt. Long black hair was spread all over the pillow. The quilt was trembling. The person under the quilt must have been terrified.

Yu Canghai was very disappointed when he saw the long hair on the pillow. It was quite obvious that the one under the quilt was not a bald little nun. Linghu Chong was really sleeping with a prostitute.

“Master Yu,” Linghu Chong said coldly, “although you are a Taoist Priest, I heard that Qingcheng priests don’t have rules against marriage and you’ve already got yourself many wives. If you are so fond of naked woman, and want to see the girl naked, why don’t you go ahead and lift up the quilt to have a good look? Why pretend to look for a female apprentice of the Heng-Shan Sword School?”

“Damn you!” Yu Canghai yelled while throwing a knife hand chop at Linghu Chong. Linghu Chong turned his body aside to dodge the blow coming toward him, but he was quite weak because of his wounds and wasn’t able to dodge fast enough; the edge of Yu Canghai’s chopping blow glanced his body. He could not hold himself steady and collapsed onto the bed. Gathering all his strength, Linghu Chong stood up again, but blood began dripping out from the corner of his mouth. His body shook a couple of times as he spat out some more blood. Yu Canghai wanted to hit him again, but out of the blue, a voice came from outside the window.

“A senior bullies a junior; how shameless!”

Yu Canghai did not waste any time. Before the last word had ended, he had already thrown a blow toward the window. Immediately following the blow, he jumped out the window. From the illumination of the candlelight inside the room, he saw an ugly hunchback turning around the corner of the house.

“Hold it!” he shouted.

The hunchback was really Lin Pingzhi in disguise. After the conflict with Yu Canghai in Liu Zhengfeng’s house, he slipped out while Yu Canghai’s mind was preoccupied with the little girl, Qu Feiyan. He hid behind a corner of the house and did not know what to do. He could not think of any way to rescue his parents.

“Everyone in the hall will have remembered me as the ugly hunchback,” he thought to himself. “When those people from the Qingcheng Sword School see me again, they will definitely kill me without hesitation. Should I change back to my original look?” He thought of how Yu Canghai had grabbed onto his wrist;

how he felt like he had lost all his strength and couldn't even struggle to get away. How could there be someone with such outstanding martial arts skills? All these thoughts flooded his mind; he completely lost track of time. He had no idea how long he had been hiding around the corner when he suddenly felt a pat on his hunchback. Stunned, he turned around quickly. The first thing he saw was a tall hunchback. It was none other than the real hunchback – "Hunchback of the North" Mu Gaofeng.

"You fake hunchback," Mu grinned, "what's so good about being a hunchback? Why the hell do you pretend to be my grandchild?"

Lin Pingzhi knew the hunchback was a very vicious man with very high Martial Arts skills. If any of his words displeased Mu, he could easily end up dead. He thought since he had already kowtowed to Mu when they were back in the great hall, and called him a true hero that helped the weak to fight the villains, and Mu did not get mad, all he needed to do was to maintain the same tone, and he surely wouldn't make Mu Gaofeng mad.

"I heard from many people that 'Hunchback of the North' Hero Mu has a very reputable name, and he always helped the weak when needed. I truly admire you, and that's why I dressed myself just like Hero Mu. Please forgive me," he apologized.

"Are you kidding me? A reputable name and helping the weak when needed? What nonsense!"

Mu Gaofeng laughed. He knew Lin Pingzhi was lying to his face, yet all these compliments sounded very enjoyable and pleasing.

"What's your name? Who's your Master?" he asked.

"Lin is really my family name. I unintentionally used your last name," Lin Pingzhi said.

Mu Gaofeng smirked. "Cut the crap! You just wanted to use my name to swindle and bluff. Yu Canghai is the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School. He could kill you by just poking you with one finger. Yet you were so bold as to offend him! You really have some guts!"

Hearing Yu Canghai's name mentioned, Lin Pingzhi's anger instantly exploded. "As long as I am still breathing, one day I will slay the scoundrel myself!" he exclaimed loudly.

"What score do you have with Yu Canghai?" asked the surprised Mu Gaofeng.

Lin Pingzhi hesitated for a few seconds. He thought, "There's no way for me to rescue my mom and dad all by myself. Why don't I ask him to help?" So he knelt down and kowtowed to Mu Gaofeng.

"My parents are his prisoners. I am begging you. Will you please help me rescue them?"

Mu Gaofeng frowned and shook his head. "I never do anything that does not benefit me. Who is your dad? What do I get if I rescue him?"

Someone's voice suddenly came from the door, whispering with urgency, "Go tell Master that in the brothel known as the Jade House, another Qingcheng Sword School member has been killed. Also someone from the Heng-Shan Sword School was wounded and just got back. Hurry!"

"We'll talk about your troubles later," Mu Gaofeng whispered to Lin Pingzhi. "There's going to be a good show. Come with me if you want to see some fun."

"As long as I am with him, I can always beg him later," Lin Pingzhi thought. So he replied, "Sure, sure! Wherever you, the respectful senior, want to go, I'll follow."

"Let's get this straight first: I, hunchback Mu, only do things that I can benefit from. If you think brown-nosing can get your grandpa to get into trouble for you, save yourself the trouble and just forget about it!" Mu Gaofeng exclaimed. Lin Pingzhi just nodded and didn't say a word.

"They've left. Follow me," Mu Gaofeng said. Lin Pingzhi only felt his right wrist being grabbed tightly, and before he knew it, he was already in the air and seemed to be speeding along the streets without even touching the ground.

Soon they arrived outside the Jade House. The two of them hid behind a tree and peered at the scene before them. They heard everything including the fight

between Yu Canghai and Tian Boguang, the search led by Liu Zhengfeng's apprentices, and the words of Linghu Chong. When Yu Canghai wanted to hit Linghu Chong again, Lin Pingzhi could not hold his anger any longer and shouted out, "A senior bullies a junior; how shameless!" Right after that, he realized he had acted very rashly and quickly turned around to hide. But Yu Canghai came so fast that with the words "hold it," the power of his hands had already immobilized Lin Pingzhi.

At that moment, all Yu needed to do was to release his inner strength and Lin Pingzhi's internal organs would be smashed into pieces, but after recognizing it was the young hunchback, Yu Canghai held back his strength and did not strike.

"So it's you!" he sneered.

He looked at Mu Gaofeng, who stood about ten feet behind Lin Pingzhi. "Hunchback Mu! Why do you instigate juniors to trouble me over and over again? What do you want?" he demanded.

Mu Gaofeng burst into loud laughter. "He claims to be my junior, but I never said he was! His name is Lin and mine is Mu, I have nothing to do with him. Master Yu, I, hunchback Mu, am not afraid of you; I just don't want to be a retard and shield some nobody from trouble. If there are great benefits for being a shield, like piles of gold or jewels or something, then I'd consider doing it! Free service like this will never interest me."

Yu Canghai was quite happy to hear these words. "If this individual has nothing to do with brother Mu and is only an imposter, then I don't have to worry on your behalf," he said. He was just about to strike when he heard someone speaking

"A senior bullies a junior; how shameless!"

Yu Canghai turned back and saw a man standing by the window. It was none other than Linghu Chong. Yu Canghai was infuriated, but the words "a senior bullies a junior; how shameless" were right on target. The two young men's Kung Fu skills were no match for him; to kill them would be as easy as stepping on a puny ant. But he would never be able to get rid of the remark "a senior

bullies a junior." And if the remark of "a senior bullies a junior" were true, of course "shameless" would be the natural conclusion. But if he just simply let these two off, he wouldn't be able to vent his anger. He sneered and said to Linghu Chong, "I'll have your Master pay for your insolence later." Then he turned to Lin Pingzhi.

"Which school are you from?" he asked.

"You murderous monster, you ruined my entire family, and you are still asking me?" Lin Pingzhi yelled furiously.

Yu Canghai was confused. "Have I met you before? How did I ruin your family? What are you talking about?" he thought to himself. With so many people around watching, he did not want to ask for more details, so he turned to Hong Renxiong. "Renxiong, waste him first, then seize Linghu Chong."

If a Qingcheng apprentice did it, it wouldn't be "a senior bullies a junior." Hong Renxiong answered, "Yes, Master!" He drew his sword and jumped forward. Lin Pingzhi went for his own sword, but before he could unsheathe it, Hong Renxiong's long cold sword was already pointed at his chest.

Lin Pingzhi yelled, "Yu Canghai, I, Lin Pingzhi, will…."

Astounded, Yu Canghai hurriedly struck out with his left palm. The energy of the strike sent Hong Renxiong's thrust aside and the sword barely missed Lin Pingzhi's right arm.

"What did you say?" Yu Canghai asked.

"Even if I, Lin Pingzhi, have to become a disembodied ghost, I'll come back and kill you," Lin Pingzhi exclaimed.

"Are you…are you Lin Pingzhi from the Fortune Prestige Escort House?" Yu Canghai asked in shock.

Lin Pingzhi thought, "Since I can't hide my identity any more, I'd rather have a quick death." So he pulled the plasters off his face and said loudly, "That's right! I am Lin Pingzhi from Fuzhou Fortune Prestige Escort House. Your son harassed an innocent girl and I killed him. You ruined my entire family.

Where…where are you keeping my father and my mother?”

The news of Qingcheng’s triumph over the Fortune Prestige Escort House had spread all over the Martial World. Most people didn’t know that Evergreen had lost in a sword fight with Lin Yuantu, so rumor said that it was really because the Qingcheng Sword School wanted to seize the Lin family’s manuscript of the “Evil-Resisting Sword Art.” And because Linghu Chong had heard the rumor, he used it to lure Luo Renjie into coming closer and then killed him. Mu Gaofeng had also heard the rumor. After the fake hunchback claimed to be “Lin Pingzhi from the Fortune Prestige Escort House,” seeing how Yu Canghai knocked aside Hong Renxiong’s sword in such a hurry and how he acted so nervously, Mu Gaofeng had no doubt that Yu Canghai really wanted to track down the “Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript” with the help of this young man. When Yu Canghai stretched his arm out and grabbed onto Lin Pingzhi’s right wrist, pulling his arm back to drag Lin over, Mu Gaofeng shouted, “Hold it!” He jumped forth rapidly and grabbed onto Lin Pingzhi’s left wrist and started pulling as well.

Lin Pingzhi could feel two great sources of power pulling his arms in opposite directions; all his joints started popping and he almost passed out from the severe pain. Yu Canghai knew very well that Lin Pingzhi would die instantly if he pulled any harder, so he thrust his long sword at Mu Gaofeng as he yelled out loudly, “Brother Mu, let him go!” Mu Gaofeng waved his right arm and blocked the sword with a shinning crescent knife. A loud ring echoed. Wasting no time, Yu Canghai launched his sword attacks, and within seconds, he had sent nine thrusts at Mu Gaofeng.

“Brother Mu, we don’t have any score to settle between us. Why should we hurt our relationship because of this lad?” He said while tightly holding on to Lin Pingzhi’s right wrist.

Waving his crescent knife back and forth, Mu Gaofeng countered all of Yu Canghai’s attacks.

“Earlier, right in front of everyone’s eyes, this lad kowtowed to me and called me ‘Grandpa.’ Everyone saw that and heard that. Although I don’t have any

score to settle with you, Master Yu, don't you think it would look bad for me if you seized someone who just called me 'Grandpa' and then killed him right in front of my eyes? If this 'Grandpa' can't even protect his grandson, then who else is going to call me 'Grandpa' in the future?"

The two talked as they fought at a faster and faster pace. The clash of weapons also became more urgent.

"Brother Mu, this man killed my son. How can I forget the pain of losing a son and not avenge him?" Yu Canghai said angrily.

"Sure," Mu Gaofeng laughed, "for Master Yu's sake, I'll help you seek your revenge. Come on, you pull to the left and I'll pull to the right, one two three, let's tear this lad to two!" After the words, he actually started counting, "One, two, and three!" As soon as he spat out the word three, he pulled harder. More of Lin Pingzhi's joints popped.

Yu Canghai was stunned. There was no need to rush the revenge. Before finding the sword art manuscript, he definitely didn't want to let Lin Pingzhi die. So he let go of Lin's wrist at once, letting Mu Gaofeng pull Lin Pingzhi away.

"Hey, thanks!" Mu Gaofeng grinned. "Master Yu is really a true friend! You even gave up taking revenge for your son for Hunchback Mu's sake. There's no other one in the Martial World who respects brotherhood as much as you do!"

"I am glad brother Mu knows that. I'll give in a little this time. There won't be a second time," Yu Canghai said coldly.

"Who knows? Maybe Master Yu would be just as nice next time and give in again," Mu Gaofeng snickered.

With a disgruntled snort, Yu Canghai waved his left arm. "Let's go!" he commanded, and all the Qingcheng apprentices left following their Master. At that moment, Sister Dingyi also headed south together with all the Heng-Shan nuns, to try to locate Yilin. Liu Zhengfeng and his apprentices had gone to the southeast corner to continue their search. So after the group from the Qingcheng Sword School left, only Mu Gaofeng and Lin Pingzhi stood outside of the Jade House.

“Hey, you are not a hunchback. You are a handsome lad!” Mu Gaofeng said with a grin. “Lad, you don’t have to call me Grandpa. I kind of like you. How about I take you as my apprentice?”

Lin Pingzhi was still in pain from being pulled between two types of high-level inner strength and had just caught his breath. Hearing Mu Gaofeng’s suggestion, he thought, “The hunchback’s Kung Fu is ten times greater than Dad’s. Even Yu Canghai was in dread of him. In my quest to seek my revenge, it would actually become possible if I have him as my teacher. But he did not care about me at all when the Qingcheng apprentice tried to kill me. However, as soon as he heard my real identity, he started to fight Yu Canghai to get hold of me. In that light, his offer to take me as his apprentice must not have come with good intentions.”

Mu Gaofeng saw his hesitation. “You already know how good the Hunchback of the North’s Kung Fu skills and fame are. I’ve never had an apprentice before. If you have me as your teacher, I will teach you all my Kung Fu skills without any reservation. By then, not only would the chaps from Qingcheng be no match for you, but after a couple of years, it would be easy to defeat Yu Canghai as well. Lad, why aren’t you kowtowing to me to show respect to your Master?”

The more anxious he sounded, the more suspicious Lin Pingzhi became. “If he really cared about me, why did he grab on to my wrist and pull so hard with no reservation? After Yu Canghai found out that I was the one who had killed his son, he actually wanted me alive. Obviously it was all because he wanted some ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ There are many honest people with high Kung Fu skills in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. If I want a good teacher, I should be looking amongst them. The hunchback here is too vicious. No matter how high his skills are, I’ll never have him as my Master.”

Seeing Lin Pingzhi still hesitating, Mu Gaofeng felt his anger growing. But he still managed a smile. “What? You think the hunchback’s Kung Fu skills are no good, and I am not worthy to be your master?” he asked.

Lin Pingzhi noticed the fleeting look of anger and viciousness on Mu Gaofeng’s face before it changed into a warm and kind smile. He knew he was

in a very delicate and dangerous situation. If he refused to call him Master, Mu would probably get infuriated and kill him right away. So he said, "Hero Mu, your offer to take me as your apprentice is a fortune I never even dared dream of. But I have been learning my family Kung Fu skills. If I want to study from another great Master, I must get permission from my father. This is not only the family rule, but also the common practice in the Martial World."

"That sounds reasonable." Mu Gaofeng nodded. "But what little skills you demonstrated here today are not even close to being called Kung Fu. Your father's Kung Fu must also be very limited. I only had a sudden impulse today wanting to take you as my apprentice. Later, I might not be similarly inclined. Good opportunities don't come by easily. You seem to be a smart lad. Why are you acting so foolishly? How about this? You kowtow to me and call me your Master first, and then I will go talk to your father. I am sure he wouldn't dare have a different opinion."

Lin Pingzhi suddenly had an idea. "Hero Mu," he said, "my parents were taken prisoners by the Qingcheng Sword School. I don't even know if they are still alive or dead yet. I beg you, hero Mu, to get them out. After that, I would be so grateful that no matter what you tell me to do, I will follow with all my heart."

Mu Gaofeng became livid. "What?" he exploded. "Are you bargaining with me? Do I have to have you as my apprentice? Who do you think you are? This is just outrageous!" Then he remembered that even Yu Canghai gave in right in front of so many eyes and did not want to tear his son's killer into two; he must have had very good reasons. People like Yu Canghai were not the type that could be easily fooled. The rumor that the "Evil-Resisting Sword Art" was truly amazing was probably true. If he could take this lad as his apprentice, then sooner or later, he would get his hands on that outstanding martial arts book. At that thought, he urged again.

"Hurry up and kowtow to me. After three kowtows, you will be my apprentice. Of course the Master will take care of the apprentice's parents. Since Yu Canghai captured my apprentice's parents, when I go ask for them from him, my request would be totally justified. How dare he object?"

Lin Pingzhi really wanted to save his parents. He thought, “Mom and Dad are prisoners of that villain. Every day would seem like a year for them. I need to get them out as soon as possible. As long as he can rescue my parents, I’d be willing to give up anything, let alone taking him as my Master.” So he knelt down in front of Mu Gaofeng to kowtow.

Afraid that Lin Pingzhi might change his mind again, Mu Gaofeng put his hand on Lin Pingzhi’s head and pushed down. Lin Pingzhi was ready to kowtow to him, but when he felt the push from the top of his head, he was filled with repugnance and naturally straightened his neck and resisted.

“Hey, kowtow!” Mu Gaofeng yelled angrily. He pushed down even harder.

Lin Pingzhi was quite egotistical; when he was still the Young Master of the house, others always flattered him and he never had to take any humiliation. Now in order to rescue his parents, he had already decided to kowtow, but when Mu Gaofeng pushed down his head, it actually aroused his stubborn nature.

“I will agree to be your apprentice only after you agree to rescue my parents. But there’s no way I am going to kowtow today!” he said loudly.

“Did you say no way? Let’s give it a try and see if there’s really no way!” Mu Gaofeng said angrily. He pushed even harder.

Lin Pingzhi fought with all his strength and struggled to stand up, but he felt as if he was under a thousand-pound rock, and simply could not, so he pushed on the ground with his hands and struggled some more. Gradually, Mu Gaofeng added more and more strength into the push. Lin Pingzhi could hear his neck joints cracking because of the pressure.

“Kowtow or not? Just a bit more strength from my hand will break your neck,” Mu Gaofeng said while laughing loudly.

Lin Pingzhi’s head was pushed down inch by inch, and soon was only half foot from the ground. “I won’t! I won’t!” he kept on yelling.

“Let’s see how you won’t kowtow.” Mu Gaofeng used a little bit more strength and Lin Pingzhi’s forehead went two inches closer to the ground. Suddenly, Lin

Pingzhi felt heat coming from his back and a stream of smooth energy fed into his body; the pressure atop his head suddenly felt like nothing. He pushed the ground and then easily stood up.

This was a complete surprise for Lin Pingzhi. To Mu Gaofeng, the surprise was even greater. The inner strength that overwhelmed his strength seemed to be the famous "Divine Art of Violet Twilight" of the Huashan Sword School. He had heard before that this style of inner strength started off indistinct, like the twilight in the sky, but its stamina had great persistency, and the strength would later be released like a storm with devastating power. That was why it got the name, "Violet Twilight." Astonished, Mu Gaofeng quickly put his hand back on Lin Pingzhi's head, but as soon as his hand touched Lin Pingzhi's forehead, a stream of persistent energy rose from Lin's forehead and shocked his hand. Mu Gaofeng felt numbness in his arm and dull pain coming from his chest.

Mu Gaofeng stepped back. "Is that Brother Yue of the Huashan Sword School?" he asked with a dry smile. "Why are you hiding behind the corner to play tricks on a hunchback?"

Smiling, a man with the look of a scholar strolled out from behind the corner of the wall. Waving a folding fan leisurely in his right hand, he looked very graceful.

"Brother Mu," the man greeted, "after so many years, you still look so young and energetic. How wonderful!"

Mu Gaofeng immediately recognized him. He was indeed "Gentleman Sword" Yue Buqun, Head Master of the Huashan Sword School. Mu had always been in dread of him. Now since Mu was caught bullying a junior who basically had no Kung Fu skills, and because Yue even gave the young lad a helping hand, Mu Gaofeng felt very awkward.

"Brother Yue," he grinned, "you are just getting younger and younger. I wish you could be my Master and teach me this 'Yin Yang Nourishment'[40] method."

"Bah! You hunchback, stop the silly jokes. When old friends reunite, there are many good topics to talk about, yet you only spout nonsense! How would I

know such a lewd method?" Yue Buqun rebuffed.

"Nobody's going to believe that you don't know that nourishment method, otherwise, how do you manage to look as young as my grandson when you are actually almost sixty years old?" Mu Gaofeng said.

When Mu Gaofeng's hand moved away from his forehead, Lin Pingzhi had already jumped back several steps. He looked at the scholarly man carefully. The man had a long goatee and a neat and clean face that shined with honesty and integrity. Admiration rose from within Lin Pingzhi's heart. Hearing Mu Gaofeng calling him "Brother Yue of the Huashan Sword School" and figuring out it was this man who had just saved him, it suddenly dawned on him.

"Could this graceful man be the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, Mr. Yue? But his age is far from what I had expected. He looks like a forty-year-old man. Lao Denuo is his apprentice, but looks much older than him." After he heard Mu Gaofeng's comments regarding Yue's way of staying young, he suddenly remembered what he had heard from his mother before: "When a Kung Fu master's inner strength reaches the highest state, he can not only extend his life span, but also recover his youthful vigor." Maybe this Mr. Yue had reached that state. His admiration grew even more.

"Brother Mu is kidding me again," Yue Buqun said with a light smile. "Brother Mu, this young man is a dutiful son, and also a man of integrity. He is good material for an apprentice; no wonder Brother Mu likes him so much. All the trouble he has had today originated from his saving my daughter Lingshan in Fuzhou. I really could not just stand aside and do nothing. Will you please show him mercy for my sake?"

Mu Gaofeng appeared to be amazed. "What? Just with the little Kung Fu he has, he could save niece Lingshan? We probably have to reverse that; it was more likely that niece Lingshan's sharp eyes picked out this handsome boy…."

Knowing that the hunchback was a mean and obscene person and that there probably wouldn't be any good comments coming from his mouth, Yue Buqun quickly cut him off.

“When people from the chivalrous side encounter trouble, they help those in need. The help could be as much as risking one’s life, or as little as giving a word of advice. It doesn’t really matter how great one’s Kung Fu skills are. Brother Mu, if you are determined to take him as your apprentice, why don’t you let the young man ask permission from his parents first, and then come to submit himself to you. Wouldn’t that be a win-win solution?”

Mu Gaofeng well knew that once Yue Buqun stepped in, things would simply not go as he had wished. So he shook his head.

“I just had a sudden impulse and wanted to take him as my apprentice. But I’ve lost that interest. Even if this lad kowtows to me ten thousand times now, I won’t take him any more.”

Out of the blue, he gave Lin Pingzhi a hard kick, which sent him into the air and sprawling twenty feet away. Yue Buqun did not expect that in any way. Mu Gaofeng had shown no sign of a sudden kick. Once his leg was extended, it was already too late to stop him. Lin Pingzhi jumped up immediately after he landed, and did not appear to have been injured.

“Brother Mu, why are you acting like a child? I’ll have to say you are the one getting younger now,” Yue Buqun said.

“Relax, Brother Yue,” Mu Gaofeng grinned. “Although I am bold, I would never dare to offend this…this your…ha-ha…I don’t even know what he’s going to become of yours. See you! Good-bye! I’d never thought even the famous Huashan Sword School would be interested in the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’.” He started stepping back as he spoke.

Yue Buqun took a step forward. “Brother Mu, what are you talking about?” he demanded loudly. Suddenly, his face seemed to turn a violet color. But the violet color only stayed for a brief moment before Yue’s normal color returned.

Mu Gaofeng saw the color change and felt a shiver in his heart. “So that was indeed the ‘Divine Art of Violet Twilight’ of the Huashan Sword School!” he thought. “Yu Buqun has good sword skills on top of this amazing inner strength. I’d better not get into a fight with him.” So he let out a grin. “I have no clue as

to what that 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' is. I am only joking about it since I saw how Yu Canghai of the Qingcheng Sword School worked hard to get his hands on it. Brother Yue, please don't mind me." He turned around and walked away.

Yue Buqun watched until Mu Gaofeng disappeared into the darkness of the night. Letting out a sigh, he murmured, "People having that level of Kung Fu skills are rare in the Martial World, but he would rather abandon himself to…." He held back the word "vice" to himself and just shook his head in disappointment.

Lin Pingzhi came rushing over, knelt down in front of him and started to kowtow.

"I beg you, Master, to take me as your apprentice. I promise to follow your word of advice and obey all school rules. I will never dare to not listen to the Master's word."

"If I take you as my apprentice, Hunchback Mu will probably start a rumor saying that I robbed him of his student." Yue Buqun smiled lightly.

"As soon as I saw you, Master, I felt unspeakable admiration. It's my honest wish from the bottom of my heart to become your apprentice," Lin Pingzhi said while kowtowing nonstop.

"Very well," Yue Buqun smiled, "I'll take you. But you haven't asked permission from your parents yet. We need to find out if they agree or not."

"If I am lucky enough to become your apprentice, my parents would be very grateful. There would be no reason why they would object. The villains of the Qingcheng Sword School captured my parents. I will need Master's help in that matter," Lin Pingzhi said.

Yue Buqun nodded. "Alright! Get up! Let's go look for your parents." He turned and shouted, "Denuo, Liang Fa, and Lingshan, you can come out now."

A group of people walked out from behind the wall. Lin Pingzhi recognized them as the apprentices of the Huashan Sword School. It turned out that they

had all arrived a while ago. Yue Buqun had told them to hide behind the wall, and only to come out after Mu Gaofeng had left, thus saving some face for Mu Gaofeng.

"Congratulations on taking a new apprentice, Master!" the Huashan apprentices all said cheerfully.

"Pingzhi," Yue Buqun said with a smile on his face, "you have met these senior apprentice brothers a while back in the small teashop. Now go ahead and pay your respects to them."

The old man was second senior brother Lao Denuo; the big, tall apprentice was third senior brother Liang Fa; the apprentice who had dressed as a porter was fourth senior brother Shi Daizi; the one holding an abacus was fifth senior brother Gao Genming; then there was sixth senior brother Lu Dayou. Each of these apprentices was the type not easily forgotten. Seventh senior brother Tao Jun and eighth senior brother Ying Luobai were two young apprentices. Lin Pingzhi saluted them one by one.

Giggles came from behind Yue Buqun's back. A gentle but crisp voice asked, "Daddy, am I a senior apprentice sister or a junior apprentice sister?"

In a daze, Lin Pingzhi recognized the wine-selling girl as the one called "Little Apprentice Sister" standing with all the other Huashan apprentices. She was actually the Master's daughter. Sticking her head out from behind Yue Buqun's back, showing only half of her snow-white face, she quickly glanced at Lin Pingzhi with her rolling eyes then hid back behind Yue Buqun again.

Lin Pingzhi thought, "I remember the girl in the wine shop had a very ugly pox-covered face. How did her face change?"

In the dim moonlight, he could not see the girl's face clearly when she stuck her head out and then drew it back so hurriedly, but even so, he could tell that the face was a pretty one. Then he remembered.

"She did mention that she disguised herself when she sold wine outside the town of Fuzhou. Sister Dingyi also said that she had taken on a very grotesque disguise. Obviously, she intentionally concealed her face with an ugly disguise."

“Everyone here all joined the school later than you, but they still call you Little Apprentice Sister. You are destined to be called Little Apprentice Sister, so of course it’s Little Apprentice Sister again.” Yue Buqun laughed.

“No way!” the girl declared with a grin. “Starting from now on, I am going to be a senior apprentice sister. Daddy, junior apprentice brother Lin will have to call me senior apprentice sister. Later when you get another one hundred or two hundred apprentices, they all have to call me senior apprentice sister.”

Giggling, she walked out from behind Yue Buqun. Under the dim moonlight, Lin Pingzhi could vaguely make out a pretty oval face and a pair of bright eyes looking straight at his face. Lin Pingzhi bowed deeply.

“Senior apprentice sister Yue, I only gained Master’s mercy and became an apprentice today. The one who becomes an apprentice earlier is the senior. Of course I am the junior apprentice.”

Yue Lingshan was very pleased. She turned to her dad. “Daddy, he called me senior apprentice sister out of his own free will. I didn’t force him.”

Yue Buqun laughed. “He had just joined our school, and you are already talking about ‘forcing.’ He will probably think that everyone in our school is like you, the seniors forcing their wills upon the juniors. What a frightening prospect!”

All the apprentices laughed at these words.

“Daddy,” Yue Lingshan said, “Big Apprentice Brother was hiding here to recover from his wounds. He was struck by that stinky Taoist Priest, and is in serious condition. Let’s go find him quickly.”

Yue Buqun frowned and shook his head. “Genming, Daizi, you two go carry Big Apprentice Brother out,” he said.

Gao Genming and Shi Daizi answered the call in unison and both jumped into the room through the window. But soon they reported, “Master, Big Apprentice Brother is not here. There’s no one in the room.” Light spilled through the window when they lit the candle in the room.

Yue Buqun frowned even more as he really did not want to enter such a disreputable place. “You,” he said to Lao Denuo, “go in there and check it out.”

“Yes, Master!” Lao Denuo answered and then walked toward the window.

“I’ll go check too,” Yue Lingshan suggested.

Yue Buqun grabbed her arm. “Nonsense! You are not allowed to go into places like this.”

Yue Lingshan almost cried. “But…but Big Apprentice Brother is so badly wounded…I am afraid that he will die.”

“Don’t worry,” Yue Buqun whispered, “he had the ‘Heavenly Connecting Glue’ of the Heng-Shan Sword School applied already. He won’t die.”

“Daddy, how…how did you know?” Yue Lingshan was both surprised and cheerful.

“Shush! Don’t ask!” Yue Buqun cut her off.

Linghu Chong was already badly wounded before he took the energy blow from Yu Canghai’s palm strike. After that, his wounds hurt even more, and he spat out more blood, but his mind still remained clear. He heard the arguments between Mu Gaofeng and Yu Canghai, how everybody left, and how his Master had showed up. He was a man who feared nothing except his Master. As soon as he heard his Master talking to Mu Gaofeng, thoughts of how his Master would punish him for all the mischief he had gotten into crossed his mind. The worry was so great that he even forgot about the pain from his wounds.

He turned to the bed and whispered, “A disaster is about to strike! My Master is here! Let’s get out of here!” Right after these words, he staggered out the room steadying himself against the wall.

Qu Feiyan dragged Yilin from under the quilt and followed him. Seeing how Linghu Chong was teetering along and was on the verge of falling down at any second, Yilin and Qu Feiyan both rushed over and supported him by his arms. Linghu Chong clenched his teeth and walked through the corridor. He knew that his Master had outstanding eyes and ears; the moment he walked out, the Master

would know about it. Seeing a big room to the right, he immediately walked into it.

"Close…close the door and the window," he said.

Qu Feiyan followed his instructions and shut the door and window. Linghu Chong could not maintain his composure any longer and collapsed onto the bed, breathing hard.

The three of them kept very quiet, and after a long while, they heard Yue Buqun's voice from far away saying, "He's not here. Let's go!" Linghu Chong let out a long breath and felt much more relaxed.

After some time had passed, someone came into the backyard and called out in a low voice, "Big Apprentice Brother? Big Apprentice Brother!" It was Lu Dayou.

Linghu Chong thought, "Monkey Six has always been the closest to me." He almost answered when he suddenly heard the bed-curtain shaking. It was Yilin trembling in fright when she heard somebody approaching. "If I answer Monkey Six," Linghu Chong thought, "I could really ruin the little Sister's reputation." So he kept silent.

Lu Dayou walked past the window while calling "Big Apprentice Brother, Big Apprentice Brother" all the way. The calling receded further and further away, and finally faded into the night.

"Hey, Linghu Chong," Qu Feiyan suddenly broke the silence, "are you going to die?"

"How can I die? If I die, it would really hurt the reputation of the Heng-Shan Sword School, and I'd be letting them down!" Linghu Chong answered.

"How do you figure that?" Qu Feiyan asked in surprise.

"I've had so much of that magical medicine of the Heng-Shan Sword School, both inside and outside. If I still can't be healed, I'd be letting…letting this Sister of the Heng-Shan Sword School down." Linghu Chong replied.

"Yep! If you died, you would really be letting her down!" Qu Feiyan grinned.

Knowing how seriously Linghu Chong had been wounded and seeing how he was still making jokes, Yilin admired his fortitude, but also felt a bit less stressed.

"Big Brother Linghu, you've just taken a hit from Yu Canghai. Let me see your wounds again."

Linghu Chong struggled to sit up, but Qu Feiyan said, "Never mind your manners. Lie down." Linghu Chong felt so weak that he really could not sit up, so he lay back down.

Qu Feiyan lit a candle. Yilin could see blood all over Linghu Chong's robe, so she threw aside all worry about propriety, gently lifted his long robe, and wiped off the blood around the wounds with a towel hanging by a rack. Taking the box of "Heavenly Connecting Glue" from her pocket, she applied all of the remaining medicine onto Linghu Chong's wounds.

"What a waste to put so much precious medicine on me!" Linghu Chong laughed.

"Big Brother Linghu," Yilin said, "you were badly wounded all because of me. This medicine is the least I can offer, even if…even if…." She did not know what to say, so just mumbled a little and then continued, "Even my respectful Master praised you as a young hero who is always ready to take on villains for a just cause. Because of that she even got into an argument with Master Yu."

"No need to praise me. As long as the respectful Sister doesn't scold me, I'd be completely thankful!" Linghu Chong grinned.

"Why would my Master scold you?" Yilin said. "Big Brother Linghu, just rest quietly for twenty-four hours, and if your wounds don't break open again, you should be alright." She took out another three "White Cloud Bear Gallbladder Pills" and helped Linghu Chong take them.

"Sis," Qu Feiyan said all of a sudden, "you stay here and keep him company. Watch out for bad guys who want to get him. My grandpa is still waiting for me. I've got to go."

“No! No!” Yilin cried out worriedly. “You cannot go. How can I stay here by myself?”

“Isn’t Linghu Chong here too?” Qu Feiyan grinned. “You are not all by yourself?” She turned around and started heading out.

Yilin was greatly concerned. She jumped forth and gripped Qu’s left arm. In her rush, she had used the holding technique of the Heng-Shan Sword School and grabbed Qu’s arm tightly.

“Don’t go!” she cried.

“Ouch! Are you trying to fight me?” Qu Feiyan chuckled.

Yilin blushed and then let go of her arm. “My good girl, please stay and keep me company,” she pleaded.

“Okay, okay. Fine! I’ll stay and keep you company. Linghu Chong is not a bad guy, why are you so afraid of him?” Qu Feiyan said.

“Sorry, Qu, did I hurt you?” Yilin asked while feeling less awkward.

“Nah, it doesn’t hurt, but Linghu Chong seems to be hurting a lot,” Qu Feiyan said.

Yilin was shocked. She immediately lifted the curtains and checked on Linghu Chong, only to find him sleeping soundly with both of his eyes shut tight. She checked Linghu Chong’s breathing with her hand and could tell that its rhythm was strong and regular. Just when she was feeling a bit better, she heard Qu Feiyan’s giggles and the sound of the window opening. She turned around in a hurry and saw Qu Feiyan jumping out of the window.

Yilin was astounded and felt completely lost. She walked next to the bed and called, “Big Brother Linghu? Big Brother Linghu! She…she just left.” But the effect of the medicine had kicked in. Linghu Chong was completely out. He didn’t hear any of Yilin’s words. Yilin was very frightened and began trembling. It took her a long while before she mustered enough strength to shut the window.

“I’d better leave soon,” she thought. “What if Big Brother Linghu wakes up

and then starts talking to me? What am I going to do then?" Then she thought, "He is so weak right now, even a child could kill him easily. How can I leave him and just flee the scene?"

In the dark night, the sound of dog barks occasionally echoed from the deep alleys far away. However, apart from those occasional noises, there was just dead silence. Other people from the brothel had fled a long time ago. It almost felt as if Linghu Chong, who was lying behind the bed curtain, was the only person left in the entire world beside her. Yilin sat stiffly on a chair, afraid to move. After what seemed an eternity, cock crows could be heard from all directions; it was almost dawn. Yilin began to worry again.

"It's going to be daybreak soon, and then people would be arriving. What should I do?"

She had been a Buddhist ever since she was a small child, and had always been taken care of by Sister Dingyi, so she really lacked real life experience on how to handle difficult situations. She could only worry, and had no idea what to do.

Suddenly, the sound of footsteps came from the alley outside. It seemed to be from a group of three or four people. The sound of their footsteps could be clearly heard in the stillness of dawn. They stopped in front of the Jade House's gate.

"You two search the east side. The two of us will search the west side. If anyone spots Linghu Chong, make sure you capture him alive. He is very badly wounded and won't be able to resist," a voice said.

When Yilin first heard the sound of people coming, she was terrified. Then when she heard them talking about capturing Linghu Chong, her resolve strengthened, "No matter what happens, I will protect Big Brother Linghu and never let him fall into the bad guys' hands." As soon as she made up her mind, fear seemed to slip away and her brain started functioning again. She rushed over by the bed and pulled out the bed sheet. After quickly wrapping Linghu Chong in the sheet, she picked him up in her arms, blew out the candlelight,

pushed open the door gently, and then sneaked out. She couldn't tell which direction she was going, so she just made sure she was walking in the opposite direction from which the voices came. Soon, she passed a vegetable garden and arrived at the back door. The back door was already half open. When the occupants of the brothel fled, they probably just left it open in their haste. She carried Linghu Chong out the back door and dashed along the small alley. In no time, she had reached the town wall.

"I must get out of the town. There are simply too many enemies for Big Brother Linghu here," she thought. She walked along the town wall and as soon as she reached the town gate, she dashed out.

She ran nonstop for at least three or four miles, intentionally picking small roads that led into the mountains. When there were no more roads, she found herself in a small valley. Feeling a bit relieved, she looked down at Linghu Chong and found him staring right into her eyes, a smile on his face.

Yilin almost panicked. Her arms started quivering, and Linghu Chong's body slipped out of her arms. "Oops!" she cried out and quickly bent down and extended her arms with a move called "Carry the Holy Scripture." Luckily, her reactions were quick, and she caught him before he hit the ground. But as a result, she lost her balance, and staggered a few steps before she steadied herself.

"Sorry!" she said hurriedly. "Are your wounds still hurting?"

"I am fine. Why don't you take a rest?" Linghu Chong smiled.

Yilin had completely forgotten about herself when she was running away from the Qingcheng apprentices. All she could think of was how to keep Linghu Chong out of danger. Now that they were finally safe, she felt like her body was going to fall apart. She used up her last bit of strength to put Linghu Chong down on the meadow gently, and then collapsed onto the ground panting heavily, trying to catch her breath.

"You forgot to control your breathing while you were running," Linghu Chong said with a smile. "That is a big no-no for…for us martial arts students. It makes

one more likely…more likely to get hurt."

Yilin blushed slightly. "Thanks for the advice, Big Brother Linghu. My Master had taught me the same thing before, but I forgot in all the commotion." She paused for a second and then asked, "How are your wounds?"

"They don't hurt as much now, but they're just a bit itchy and numb," Linghu Chong said.

"Great! Great!" Yilin exclaimed. "When a wound gets itchy and numb, that means it's healing. I didn't expect it would start healing this fast."

Linghu Chong was quite moved seeing Yilin's joy. "It's all due to the magical medicine of your respectful school." He let out a sigh. "Too bad that we had to suffer humiliation from those low-life scoundrels because of my wounds. If we had fallen into Qingcheng's hands just now, it would be no big deal if I got killed right away, but most likely they would have tried to humiliate us even more," he said grouchily.

"So you heard everything?" Yilin asked. She felt completely embarrassed when she thought about how he could have been staring at her for the entire time she was carrying him while running away; her face reddened.

Linghu Chong didn't realize that she was actually feeling embarrassed, and thought she was just exhausted from so much running.

"Apprentice sister, why don't you do some of the breathing exercises of your school to help harmonize your inner strength, so you don't suffer any internal injuries?"

"Alright," Yilin agreed.

She sat down cross-legged and tried to work her inner strength with the breathing techniques taught by her Master. But she felt very uneasy and simply could not calm herself down to focus on the breathing exercises. Every other minute, she would glance at Linghu Chong to see if his wounds had gotten any better or worse, or if he was looking at her. At the fourth glance, her eyes happened to meet Linghu Chong's eyes. With a big shock, she immediately shut

her eyes tightly. Linghu Chong, on the other hand, started laughing loudly. Yilin blushed even more and asked shyly, "Why…why are you laughing?"

"Nothing," Linghu Chong said. "You are still young and probably don't do well in the meditative exercises. If you can't calm down and get focused, then don't force yourself. Uncle-Master Dingyi must have taught you that if you work too hard on your exercises, it actually does more harm than good. This is especially true for breathing exercises; you really need to be in a calm state." He paused a moment to catch his breath, and then continued, "Don't worry! My base energy is refilling itself slowly. Even if those Qingcheng crooks come after us, there's no need to be afraid. We'll just let them demonstrate…demonstrate that 'Bum Bum Back…Back….'"

"Demonstrate the Qingcheng Sword School's 'Geese Landing in Sand' technique." Yilin smiled.

"Right!" Linghu Chong grinned. "That's good. The 'Bum Bum Back' part does not sound very graceful. Let's just call it the 'Qingcheng Sword School's Geese…Landing in Sand' technique!" After saying the last word, he had to catch his breath again.

"Don't talk too much! Take a good long nap," Yilin suggested.

"My Master is also in the town of Hengshan now! I wish I could get up right now and go to Uncle-Master Liu's house to watch the fun," Linghu Chong murmured.

Yilin noticed Linghu Chong's lips were chapped and his eye sockets were also very dry. It must have been because he had lost so much blood. He badly needed to drink some water.

"Let me go find some water for you. You must be thirsty, right?" she asked.

"On our way here, I saw lots of watermelons in the field to the left. Why don't you go get some?" Linghu Chong suggested.

"Alright." Yilin stood up and checked her pockets, but could not find any money. "Big Brother Linghu, do you have any money with you?" she asked.

“For what?”

“For the watermelons of course!”

“Did you actually intend to pay for them?” Linghu Chong grinned. “You can just go pick some. There’s nobody living close by. The owner must be far away. Who are you going to buy from?”

“But to take without consent is…is stealing,” Yilin mumbled, “and that’s the second prohibition in the Five Prohibitions. We can’t do that. If we don’t have any money, we can beg alms from them. I am sure they will be kind enough to give us a watermelon.”

Linghu Chong became impatient. “You little….” He wanted to say “you little silly nun,” but because of her efforts on his behalf, he stopped at the word “little.”

Yilin could tell that he was disgruntled, so she dared not to say a word and simply walked in the direction they had come from looking for the watermelon field. After walking for about a mile, she did see a field several acres large and full of watermelons. Only the chirping of cicadas filled the air. There was no one around at all.

“Big Brother Linghu wanted to have some watermelon, but these watermelons all belong to someone, how can I steal from him?” she murmured to herself.

She strode down another half a mile and walked to the top of a small rise to look around, but she still could find no one, not even a shed or a hut, so she walked back to the watermelon field. Standing in the middle of the field, she hesitated for a long time before finally sticking her hands out to pick a melon, but then she pulled her hands back when she remembered the prohibition told many times by her Master, that one should never steal from others. She wanted to walk away from the field, but then Linghu Chong’s thirsty face appeared in her mind. She clenched her teeth, put her palms together,[41] and then prayed inwardly, “Dear Buddha, I really don’t want to steal. It’s all because of Big Brother Linghu…Big Brother Linghu wants to eat some watermelon.” But when she thought about it again, “Big Brother Linghu wants to eat some watermelon”

really wasn't a great reason. She was so worried that teardrops started welling up in her eyes. She held a watermelon with both hands and then lifted it up; the stem broke easily.

"He has saved my life," she thought, "what's the big deal if I have to fall down to hell and never be reborn again? The one who commits the crime will be the one responsible. It's me, Yilin, who broke the prohibition. It has nothing to do with Big Brother Linghu." She held the watermelon in her arms and then walked back.

Linghu Chong never really took common rules and prohibitions seriously. When he heard Yilin talking about begging alms for a watermelon, he simply assumed this nun was too young and inexperienced. He had never expected the matter of getting a watermelon to be such a great moral dilemma for her. When he saw Yilin come back with the melon, he was very pleased.

"Good apprentice sister! What a well-behaved little girl!" he praised.

Yilin felt a shock in her heart when she heard how he called her, and almost dropped the watermelon. She quickly wrapped it with the front of her robe. Linghu Chong laughed.

"Why are you so worried? Was someone after you because you stole his watermelon?"

"No, no one is after me." Yilin blushed and then sat down slowly.

The sun had risen from the east; it was a sunny day. Linghu Chong and Yilin were sitting by the shady side of the mountain, and the sun had yet to reach them. All the trees around them had been washed by the recent rain and looked greener than usual. Clear and fresh air filled the valley. Yilin collected herself, and then pulled out the broken sword by her waist. Seeing the broken tip of the sword, she thought, "That villain Tian Boguang really had high Kung Fu skills. If it weren't for Big Brother Linghu risking his life to save mine, I wouldn't be sitting here in peace." She glanced at Linghu Chong from the corner of her eyes and saw a bloodless face with sunken eye sockets. "For him," she thought, "even if I have to violate more rules and break more prohibitions, I will have no

regrets. To steal a watermelon is really nothing." By then, she had finally cleared all the guilt from her mind. She wiped the broken sword clean with a corner of her robe, and then sliced the watermelon open. A sweet smell quickly filled the air.

"Good melon!" Linghu Chong sniffed and then shouted. "Apprentice sister, I just remembered a joke. In the Lantern Festival earlier this year, when several fellow apprentices of our Huashan Sword School got together to drink wine, Little Apprentice Sister Lingshan composed a riddle. It went, 'A small dog on the left and a dumb melon on the right. What's the character?' At that time, sixth junior apprentice brother Lu Dayou – he's the one who was looking for me last night – was sitting to her left. I was sitting to her right."

"This riddle of hers was really making fun of you and the apprentice brother Lu." Yilin smiled.

"Right! This riddle is not hard at all. The answer is the character 'hu' in my name Linghu Chong.[42] It was an old joke that she read from a book. It just happened that sixth junior apprentice brother was sitting to her left and I was sitting to her right. And now, by coincidence, next to me, it's a small dog on one side and a big melon on the other." Linghu Chong pointed at the watermelon and then pointed at Yilin with a big smile on his face.

"Aha, you are really calling me a dog," Yilin said.

She cut the melon into slices. After taking out the seeds, she handed him one. Linghu Chong took a bite. The melon was very sweet and soothing; he quickly finished it. Yilin was very delighted when she saw how he enjoyed it. Since Linghu Chong was eating while half lying down, the juice dripped all over his robe. Yilin cut the second slice into smaller pieces and handed them to him one piece at a time. Eating this way, Linghu Chong managed not to drip any more juice over himself. Seeing how his wound hurt because of the arm movements required every time he stuck his hand out to take the small pieces, she started feeding the small pieces of melon directly into his mouth. Linghu Chong consumed almost half a melon before he realized that Yilin had not had any of

the melon herself.

"Have some yourself."

"I'll wait till you've had enough."

"I've had enough. Go ahead and eat!"

Yilin felt thirsty, so after putting several more pieces into Linghu Chong's mouth, she put a small one into her own mouth. Seeing that Linghu Chong stared at her without blinking, she felt shy and turned her back towards him.

"Wow, how pretty!" Linghu Chong suddenly exclaimed. His voice was filled with praise.

Yilin felt extremely embarrassed. "Why did he suddenly say I am pretty?" she thought. She felt like getting up and running away but being in two minds, she couldn't bring herself to do so. She felt her whole body burning; even her neck reddened because of shyness. Then she heard Linghu Chong saying, "Look, how pretty! Do you see that?"

Yilin turned slightly and saw him pointing at the west sky. She followed his finger and saw a beautiful rainbow in the distant sky extending out from behind the trees. She then realized Linghu Chong's comment "how pretty" was referring to the rainbow, and she had interpreted it in a totally different way. She felt very embarrassed, but the embarrassment now was also mixed with a little disappointment, very different from the embarrassment she felt earlier, which also had a bit of shyness and a bit of joy in it.

"Listen carefully! Do you hear that?" Linghu Chong asked.

Yilin cocked her head and listened carefully. She could vaguely hear the sound of flowing water coming from where the rainbow began.

"Sounds like a waterfall," she replied.

"Exactly! After so many days of rain, there must be waterfalls all over the valley! Let's go take a look!"

"You…you'd better just quietly rest a few more moments," Yilin suggested.

“There is only bare stone around here; so dull! I think it’s better to go watch the waterfalls,” Linghu Chong insisted.

Yilin did not want to go against his will, so she propped him up. She blushed when she suddenly thought: “I’ve had him in my arms twice. The first time was when I thought he had died. The second time was when I was fleeing from danger. Although he is still wounded badly, he is completely conscious. How can I hold him in my arms again? He is insisting on going to the waterfall. Could it be that…that he wants me…?”

While she was still hesitating, Linghu Chong had picked up a broken tree branch to use as a crutch and had started walking slowly. Seeing that, Yilin realized that she had gotten the wrong idea again.

Yilin quickly rushed over and held Linghu Chong’s arm. She criticized herself inwardly, “What’s wrong with me? Big Brother Linghu is a true gentleman. Why am I so capricious and always thinking weird thoughts? Maybe because I am alone with a man, and just want to protect myself? Although he and Tian Boguang are both men, one has high morals while the other has none. I really shouldn’t put them into the same category.”

Linghu Chong staggered along, yet was able to keep himself supported. After a few moments, they passed by a big rock. Yilin propped Linghu Chong by the rock to sit down and rest.

“Here’s a nice spot too. Do you absolutely have to go over there to watch the waterfall?” she asked.

“If you say this is a good spot, I’ll stay here for a while and keep you company.” Linghu Chong smiled.

“Fine, fine. The scenery is better over there. If you feel happier watching the waterfall, maybe your wounds will heal faster.” Yilin gave in.

Linghu Chong smiled and slowly stood up. The two slowly rounded a small pass, and were suddenly embraced by the thunder-like sound of a waterfall. After another short distance, the sound became even louder. After walking through a small wood, a waterfall appeared in front of their eyes like a white

stripe hanging from the cliff above.

"We have a waterfall by the side of the Jade Maiden Peak at Mount Huashan also," Linghu Chong said cheerfully. "It's even bigger than this one. It looks similar though. Little Apprentice Sister Lingshan and I always practice our sword art skills by the waterfall. Sometimes when she gets mischievous, she will even run through the waterfall."

Yilin suddenly came to a realization when she heard the name "Little Apprentice Sister Lingshan" being mentioned the second time. "He insisted on coming to the waterfall in spite of his wounds not because he wanted to enjoy the scenery. He was thinking of his Little Apprentice Sister Lingshan." For some reason, she felt a great pain in her heart as if someone had just given it a hard punch.

Linghu Chong went on, "Once when we were practicing sword arts by the waterfall, she tripped and fell down, almost falling into the deep pool at the bottom. Luckily I grabbed hold of her quickly enough. That could have been one dangerous accident!"

"Do you have many apprentice sisters?" Yilin asked dryly.

"We have a total of seven female apprentices," Linghu Chong replied, "and Little Apprentice Sister Lingshan is the daughter of Master. We all call her Little Apprentice Sister. The other six are apprentices of Master's wife."

"Oh, so she's Uncle-Master Yue's daughter. Does she…she…she get along well with you?"

Linghu Chong sat down slowly. "I am an orphan with no parents. Fifteen years ago when the respectful Master and Master-Wife took me as an apprentice out of mercy, Little Apprentice Sister was only three. I was much older than she was, so I always carried her out to pick fruits and chase rabbits. We grew up together. Master and Master-Wife don't have a son, so they treated me like their own son. Little Apprentice Sister is just like my own sister."

"Oh," Yilin answered. After a short while, she said, "I am also an orphan with no parents. I was taken in by my Master and have been a nun ever since I was a

child."

"What a pity!" Linghu Chong exclaimed. Yilin turned toward him and looked at him questioningly. "If you weren't an apprentice of Uncle-Master Dingyi," Linghu Chong said, "I could have begged Master-Wife to take you in as an apprentice. We have lots of apprentice brothers and sisters. With twenty odd people, it's really lively. After practices, we just play around in groups. Master and Master-Wife don't really discipline us much. When you meet my Little Apprentice Sister, you will surely like her and be good friends with her."

"Too bad I don't have such good luck!" Yilin said. "But in the White-Cloud Nunnery, Master and apprentice sisters are all very nice to me. I…I…am very happy too."

"Yes, yes! I didn't mean anything by my remarks! Uncle-Master Dingyi's sword skills are almost godlike. When my Master and Master-Wife speak of sword arts from different schools and styles, they always mention your respectful Master. The Heng-Shan Sword School is no less than the Huashan Sword School in any way!"

"Big Brother Linghu," Yilin said, "the other day when you said to Tian Boguang that fighting while standing up, Tian Boguang is the fourteenth best in the Martial World; Uncle-Master Yue is eighth. Then how is my Master ranked?"

Linghu Chong began laughing. "I was just fooling Tian Boguang. There isn't any ranking like that. Everyone's Kung Fu skills change every single day. Some get better, and some get worse because of old age or something else. How could someone actually rank all of them? Tian Boguang does have high Kung Fu skills, but probably not good enough to be fourteenth in the entire Martial World. I intentionally ranked him high to make him happy."

"Oh! So you were just fooling him." Yilin sat there, staring at the waterfall blankly for a while, lost in thought. Then she asked, "Do you always like to fool people?"

Linghu Chong grinned. "That depends. I wouldn't say 'always.' Some people you can fool, and some people you cannot. When my Master and Master-Wife

ask me about things, of course I wouldn't dare try to fool them."

"Oh," Yilin hummed. "Then how about your fellow apprentice brothers and sisters?" She originally wanted to ask, "Do you fool your Little Apprentice Sister Lingshan?" but for some reason, she was afraid to put forth the question so boldly.

"Well, that depends on who it is, and what it's about," Linghu Chong said with a smile. "We apprentice brothers always play jokes on each other. If we don't fool people, there would be no fun!"

"Even with apprentice sister Lingshan? You fool her too?" Yilin finally asked.

Linghu Chong had never thought about this before. He frowned and thought about it for a while. Throughout his life, he had never fooled her on important issues. So he said, "For important things, I will never fool her. If we were just playing together, then of course there would be some fooling and joking."

In the White-Cloud Nunnery, Yilin's Master did not laugh much and enforced very strict nunnery rules. The apprentice sisters also maintained cold emotionless expressions most of the time. Although fellow apprentices cared for each other, very seldom would one tell a joke, much less play jokes on each other. There were quite a few young and vivacious secular girl apprentices under Uncle-Master Dingjing and Uncle-Master Dingxian, but they rarely joked with the nun apprentices. She spent her entire childhood in loneliness and lived a quiet life. Other than breathing exercises and martial arts training, all she did was to drum on the wooden fish and read Buddhist scriptures. When she heard Linghu Chong talking about the fun shared amongst Huashan apprentices, she longed for it.

"It would be really fun if I could go with him to play at Mount Huashan," she thought. Then she figured, "After all the major disturbances I caused this time, Master surely wouldn't let me out again once we get back to the nunnery. Playing at Mount Huashan would only be wishful thinking. Even if I did go to Mount Huashan, he would be accompanying his Little Apprentice Sister all the time. I don't know anyone else, who's going to keep me company?" A sudden

sadness came over her; tears almost rolled down her cheeks.

Linghu Chong did not notice. He stared at the waterfall and said, "Little Apprentice Sister and I are working on a set of sword arts that will have moves working within the falling water. Apprentice sister, do you know what the purpose is?"

"I don't know." Yilin shook her head. Her voice choked, but Linghu Chong didn't notice that either.

"When we fight somebody," he went on, "if he has a good level of inner strength, then the fierce inner strength will be released along with his punches or weapon slashes. The inner strength, although invisible, will knock our swords away. When Little Apprentice Sister and I practiced our sword skills in the waterfall, we imagined the power of the falling water to be the inner strength from the enemy, so we not only had to block the enemy's energy attack, but also try to redirect his own inner strength back at him."

"So were you able to get it done?" seeing that Linghu Chong was in high spirits, Yilin asked.

"Nope! Nope!" Linghu Chong shook his head. "It's so hard to create a new set of sword arts! And we couldn't really create any new moves; we just modified some of the Huashan Sword Art moves we had learned from the Master to thrust in the waterfall. Even if we did come up with some new ideas, they were just for fun; it would be useless in a real fight. Otherwise, why would I be beaten up so badly by Tian Boguang?" He made a short pause while moving his hands about slowly. "I just thought of another move!" he said happily. "After I recover from my wounds, I can try it out with Little Apprentice Sister."

"What's the name of this sword art of yours?" Yilin asked gently.

"I really didn't want to have a name for it, but Little Apprentice Sister insisted on giving it one. She called it 'Chong-Ling Sword Art,' because it was created by both her and me," Linghu Chong said with a smile.

"Chong-Ling Sword Art. Chong-Ling Sword Art. Hmm, in the name of the sword art, there's your name and there's her name too. When you pass it on to

later generations, everyone will know it was…was created by the two of you."

Linghu Chong laughed. "My Little Apprentice Sister said that because she's like a little child. With our incomplete understanding of martial arts, we are not qualified to create any sword arts. Don't tell this to anyone else. If others hear about this, they'd be laughing their asses off!"

"Of course, I won't tell anyone," Yilin said. She stopped for a moment and then smiled. "Actually, others have already heard about how you created your own sword art."

Linghu Chong was astounded. "Really? Did apprentice sister Lingshan tell others?" he asked.

"It was you who told Tian Boguang." Yilin grinned. "Didn't you say that you created a set of sword arts thrusting at flies while sitting down?"

Linghu Chong burst into loud laughter. "I was making things up with him. You still remember that, huh?" When he laughed loudly, the muscles around his wound moved and he grimaced with discomfort.

"Oh no! It's my entire fault! Your wounds are hurting again! Please don't speak anymore. You need to rest quietly," Yilin said.

Linghu Chong closed his eyes. But after only a short while, he opened them again. "I just thought the scenery here would be better, but now that we're by the waterfall, we can't see the rainbow any more."

"The waterfall has the beauty of a waterfall; the rainbow has the beauty of a rainbow," Yilin said.

Linghu Chong nodded. "That's absolutely right! There are no perfect things in the world. When one works so hard to go after something, once he gets it, it's no big deal anymore, but the things he had in his hands would have been lost."

"Big Brother Linghu, what you just said has profound meaning behind it. It's a pity that my understanding of Buddhism is too shallow, and cannot understand the full extent of it. If my Master heard your words, she would be able to come up with a good explanation."

“What profound meaning? What do I know? Hmm, I am tired!” Linghu Chong let out a sigh and then slowly closed his eyes. His breathing gradually slowed down and soon he fell asleep.

Yilin stayed by Linghu Chong’s side, and gently whisked about a leafy branch to drive away mosquitoes and other bugs from him. After a couple of hours, she felt tired too, and almost fell asleep. But she suddenly thought, “When he wakes up later, he will definitely get hungry. There’s not much to eat around here. Why don’t I go get a couple more watermelons? They would help satisfy our thirst and hunger.” So she strode back to the watermelon field and picked two more melons. Afraid that someone or some wild animals might bother Linghu Chong while she was away, she rushed back. Only after she saw him sleeping soundly, did she relax and sat down quietly beside him.

Linghu Chong opened his eyes. “I thought you had gone back,” he said with a smile.

“Gone back?” Yilin was surprised.

“Aren’t your Master and apprentice sisters still looking for you? They must be worried,” Linghu Chong said.

Yilin hadn’t thought about that at all. Now hearing these words, she got worried. “When I see Master again sometime later, will she be angry with me?” she wondered.

“Apprentice sister, thank you for accompanying me for so long. You have already saved my life. You should really go back now,” Linghu Chong said.

“No!” Yilin shook her head. “How can I leave you out in the middle of nowhere by yourself, with no one to take care of you?”

“When you get back to Uncle-Master Liu’s house, you can tell my junior apprentice brothers in secret. Then they will come to take care of me.”

Yilin felt really sad. “So it’s really because he wants the company of his Little Apprentice Sister; the sooner I go get her, the better,” She thought. Not able to suppress her sadness, she began weeping; teardrops started dripping down to the

ground.

Seeing her cry, Linghu Chong was surprised.

“Why…why are you crying? Are you afraid of getting punished by your Master when you get back?” he asked.

Yilin shook her head.

“Oh, I see. You are afraid to bump into Tian Boguang again. Don’t be afraid, from now on, he will only run away from you as soon as you are in sight. He will never dare approach you again,” Linghu Chong said.

Yilin shook her head again and more teardrops fell down on the ground.

Linghu Chong was confused. “Well…err…my mistake. I apologize. Little apprentice sister, don’t get mad,” he pleaded.

Hearing his gentle words, Yilin felt better, but then she thought, “He said these words in such a soft-spoken and submissive way; obviously he is used to apologizing to his Little Apprentice Sister, and now he just blurted them out without thinking.” So she blubbered and stamped her feet on the ground.

“I am not your Little Apprentice Sister. You…you…all you can remember is your Little Apprentice Sister,” she complained.

After the words were blurted out, she immediately regretted it. “I am a nun, why am I saying things like this to him? That’s very inappropriate,” she thought. Her face flushed and she turned aside.

Linghu Chong looked at her. Her face was completely red and teardrops were still rolling down her cheeks. It was almost like a small red blossom by the waterfall, its petals sprinkled with drops of water, charming and delicate. “Wow, she is so pretty. Really no less so than apprentice sister Lingshan,” he thought.

“You are much younger than I am. Our Five Mountains Sword Alliance is like ‘Same root different branches.’ We are all apprentice brothers and sisters. Of course you are my little apprentice sister, too. Tell me how I have offended you, will you?” he said softly.

“You did not offend me. I know you want me to leave so you won’t get mad at me and won’t have bad luck. You said it before: one sees a nun, one loses….” She didn’t even finish her sentence and just kept on sobbing.

Linghu Chong could not help but feel amused. “Aha, so she wants to get even with me for the Huiyan Wine House incident. Well, I admit I should apologize for that!” he thought.

“Linghu Chong was such a jerk and said so much nonsense. The other day in Huiyan Wine House, I said so many wrong things and offended your entire respectful school. I really should be punished!” He raised his hand and gave himself a couple of slaps in the face.

Yilin turned back in a hurry. “Don’t…don’t…I…don’t blame you. I…I just don’t want to bring you bad luck.”

“Very punishable!” Linghu Chong said, and slapped himself one more time.

“I am not angry now. Big Brother Linghu, don’t…don’t beat yourself,” Yilin said in a hurry.

“You’re not angry anymore?” Linghu Chong asked. Yilin shook her head. “But you are not smiling at all. Isn’t that still being angry?” Linghu Chong said.

Yilin squeezed out a smile, but out of the blue, for no reason, she felt even greater sadness overwhelm her, and could not help weeping again, so she turned away once more.

Linghu Chong suddenly let out a long sigh. Yilin slowly stopped weeping and asked quietly, “Why…why did you sigh?”

Linghu Chong laughed hard inwardly. “After all, she’s just a little girl, and is falling for this trick of mine too!” he thought. He had been Yue Lingshan’s companion ever since he was a child. Yue Lingshan would lose her temper now and then and stop talking to him no matter how he coaxed her. Regardless of what he said, she would not pay any attention to him. Then Linghu Chong would put on an act to arouse her curiosity, and then get her to approach him. Yilin had never been at odds with anyone before, so of course it worked like a

charm. In no time, she had fallen for his trick. Linghu Chong let out another long sigh and turned away silently.

"Big Brother Linghu, did I get you upset? It was my fault; please don't pay… pay any attention to it," Yilin said.

"No, you didn't get me upset," Linghu Chong said.

Yilin could see his worried face, but had no idea that he was actually laughing loudly inwardly and had pretended the whole thing, so she got worried.

"I got you to hit yourself. Let me…let me hit myself to make it even."

She raised her hand and slapped herself in the right cheek. Before she could slap herself again, Linghu Chong had sat up and gripped her wrist. But because of the body movement, his wound stung greatly, and he could not help but groan.

"Ah, lie…lie down quickly. Don't aggravate your wounds," Yilin said hurriedly. She helped him to lie down slowly while blaming herself, "Ah, I am so stupid. I cannot do anything right. Big Brother Linghu, is it…hurting badly?"

Linghu Chong's wound did hurt pretty badly. If it were any other time, he would never admit it. But now he had an idea. "I'll have to do such and such to get her smiling again." He scowled and let out several snorts.

Yilin was very concerned. "Hopefully it won't…won't start bleeding again," she murmured.

She felt his forehead with her hand and was pleased to find that he didn't have a fever. After a few moments, she asked gently, "Are you feeling a bit better?"

"Still hurts badly," Linghu Chong said.

Yilin pulled a long face and had no idea what to do.

"Wow, it hurts! I wish sixth…sixth apprentice brother were here," Linghu Chong muttered.

"Why? He has special painkillers?" Yilin asked.

"Yeah! His mouth is the painkiller. I've been wounded pretty badly before,

and was in terrible pain. Sixth apprentice brother is really good at telling jokes. When I listen to his jokes and laugh at them, I forget about the pain from my wounds completely. I really wish he were here. Ouch…woo…it really hurts… ou…ouch!"

Yilin felt that she was in an awkward position. People under Master Dingyi wore a solemn face everyday while reading Buddhist scriptures, praying to Buddha, and practicing martial arts. It was very rare in the White-Cloud Nunnery to actually hear any laughter. For her to tell a joke was almost against her nature. She thought, "Apprentice brother Lu Dayou is not here, and Big Brother Linghu wants to hear some jokes, I guess I'll have to tell the jokes, but…but…I don't know any jokes." A sudden idea popped into her head and she remembered something.

"Big Brother Linghu, I don't know how to tell jokes, but I've read a book of scripture in our Scripture Room that seemed to be interesting. It's called the 'Scripture of Hundred Parables.' Have you read it before?"

Linghu Chong shook his head. "Nope. I never read any books, especially Buddhist scriptures."

Yilin blushed slightly. "I am so stupid to ask such a foolish question. You are not a Buddhist; of course you don't read Buddhist Scriptures." She paused and then went on, "The book 'Scripture of Hundred Parables' was written by a great Indian monk named Gazena. There are many interesting stories in the book."

"Great! I love interesting stories. Tell me some!" Linghu Chong encouraged her.

Yilin smiled as countless of stories flashed through her memory. "Ok, let me tell you the parable of the 'Plough Breaking Head.' A long time ago, there was this bald headed man. He was naturally bald, and didn't have a single hair on his head. For some reason, he got into an argument with a farmer. The farmer had a plough in his hands, so he took the plough and struck the bald man's head. That blow broke the skin of the man's head and it started bleeding, but the bald man only laughed and took the abuse without dodging. Bystanders felt it very strange

and asked him why he didn't dodge the attack but rather laughed at it. The bald man said with a big smile, 'That farmer is so dumb that when he did not find any hair on my head, he thought it was a rock, and then proceeded to use his plough to break the rock. If I dodged, wouldn't I be agreeing that he was the smart one?'"

Linghu Chong burst into loud laughter. "Wonderful story!" he exclaimed. "That bald man was a real character! Even if he has to lose his life taking a beating, he shouldn't budge."

Seeing Linghu Chong's happy face, Yilin felt great contentment. "Let me tell you another one called the parable of the 'Doctor Making Princess Grow Up'," she said. "Once upon a time, a king had a daughter. The king was a very impatient man. Seeing that the princess was just a little baby, he really wanted her to grow up fast. One day, he called upon the royal doctor and ordered him to make a special kind of medicine for the princess, so that when the princess took the medicine, she would grow up immediately. The royal doctor said, 'It is possible to make such special medicine, but to collect all the ingredients and to refine them would require a lot of work. Please let me take the princess home and work on the medicine immediately. I will try to get it done as fast as I can, but your majesty cannot press me.' The king said, 'Fine, I won't press you.' The royal doctor carried the princess back to his own home and then started reporting to the king everyday that he was working on getting the ingredients and refining them. Twelve years went by. The royal doctor then reported to the king, 'I have finished making the special medicine and the princess took the medicine today.' He brought the princess to the king. The king was very pleased to see that the little baby had grown into a slim and graceful young girl. He praised the royal doctor's excellent skills since right after taking the special medicine his daughter did grow up. So he granted him great quantities of gold and jewels."

Linghu Chong burst into loud laughter again. "You said the king was an impatient man," he said, "but he was actually not impatient at all. Didn't he wait twelve years? If I were the royal doctor, I would only need one day to change

the baby princess into a seventeen year old slim and graceful young girl."

Yilin stared at Linghu Chong with her eyes wide open. "How would you manage that?" she asked.

Linghu Chong grinned. "Apply 'Heavenly Connecting Glue' dressing outside and take 'White Cloud Bear Gallbladder Pills' inside."

"Those are medicines for cuts and bruises, how can they make one grow taller and older?" Yilin asked, laughing.

"That's right. After I carry the baby princess back home, I'd get four tailors…."

"Why would you get four tailors?" Yilin was even more confused.

"For making new dresses, of course." Linghu Chong replied. "I'd have them measure your size and make a set of royal gowns the same night. The second morning, after you put them on, with an exquisite phoenix coronet on your head, a silk skirt with a hundred flower patterns, and a pair of slippers embroidered with golden thread and decorated with pearls on your feet, you can gracefully walk into the palace. First you call his majesty three times, then bow down to salute while saying, 'My royal father, after I took the royal doctor Linghu Chong's magical medicine, I grew up in one single night.' When the king sees such a beautiful and lovely princess, he will burst with so much joy that he would never bother to check if you were real or not. Then, I, the royal doctor Linghu Chong, would of course get a handsome reward!"

Yilin giggled uncontrollably while listening to Linghu Chong. When he finally finished, she laughed so hard that she had to bend down and could not straighten herself up. After laughing for a long while, she said, "You are definitely smarter than the royal doctor in the 'Scripture of the Hundred Parables.' Too bad that I…I am so ugly, and don't look like a princess at all."

"If you are ugly, then there is nobody who could call themselves pretty in this world. In all the ages, there must have been tens of thousands of princesses, but none can compare with you," Linghu Chong said.

Yilin was overjoyed to hear him complimenting her so earnestly. “Did you meet all those tens of thousands of princesses?” she asked with a smile.

“Of course! I checked them out one by one in my dreams,” Linghu Chong said.

“Hey, why do you always dream about princesses?” Yilin grinned.

Linghu Chong chuckled and said, “When one thinks too much….” He suddenly remembered that Yilin was only an innocent and artless young nun. By joking with him, she had already violated her vows, how could he still carry on with her without any consideration? When he thought of that, he immediately became serious and faked a yawn.

“Ah, Big Brother Linghu, you must be tired. You should close your eyes and nap for a while,” Yilin said.

“Yes! Your jokes really worked magic. My wounds are not hurting anymore,” Linghu Chong said.

He had wanted Yilin to tell jokes so she would stop crying and smile again. Now that she was smiling, his goal had been accomplished, so he slowly closed his eyes.

Yilin sat by his side and gently whisked the branch again to drive away bugs. The sound of croaking frogs could be heard from streams in the distance almost like a sweet lullaby. Yilin started feeling fatigued. Her eyelids were getting heavier and heavier; she couldn’t keep her eyes open and finally dozed off into her own dream world.

In the dream, she wore the beautiful dress of a princess and walked into a magnificent palace. A handsome young man by her side held her hand, and he seemed to vaguely resemble Linghu Chong. Then the two of them started floating into the air and above the clouds. She just felt unspeakable joy and fulfillment. Suddenly an old nun ran after them, scowling, with a sword in her hand. It was Master! Yilin was shocked! She heard her Master yelling, “You dirty little swine, you not only didn’t follow the rules of the nunnery, but dared to be a princess, and mix around with this loafer!” Master grabbed her arm

while yelling and started pulling insistently. Instantly, everything fell into complete darkness. Linghu Chong disappeared, and Master also disappeared, leaving her falling through the heavy dark clouds. Yilin screamed in fear, "Big Brother Linghu, Big Brother Linghu!" Her entire body became weak and she could neither move her arms nor her legs. Not able to struggle, she screamed even more and suddenly found herself waking up from the nightmare and being stared at by Linghu Chong, his eyes wide open. Yilin blushed. "I…I…," she mumbled shyly.

"Did you have a nightmare?" Linghu Chong asked.

Yilin's face blushed again. "I am not sure." Then with a quick glance, she found that Linghu Chong had an unusual expression on his face; it seemed as though he was trying to endure some severe pain.

"Your…your wounds are hurting badly?" she asked hurriedly.

"It's no big deal," Linghu Chong said, but his voice was shaking. Soon, big drops of sweat beaded on his forehead. Yilin could easily tell that he was in great pain.

Yilin was very worried and kept asking herself, "What should I do? What should I do?"

She took out a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow. When her little fingers brushed Linghu Chong's forehead, it felt as if she had just touched a piece of burning coal. She once heard from her Master that when a person was wounded by knife or sword cuts and became feverish it would be very dangerous. Out of desperation, she started reciting Buddhist scriptures.

"For all living creatures, when trouble happens, if he calls Bodhisattva Guanyin's name with absolute faith, then Bodhisattva Guanyin[43] would hear him and help him out of trouble. If the one calling Bodhisattva Guanyin's name were trapped in a big fire, fire would not be able to burn him, all because of the holy power of the Bodhisattva. If he were washed away by big waves, then when he calls Bodhisattva's name, he would drift to a shallow spot…."

The scriptures were from the ‘Scripture of Magical Power from Bodhisattva Guanyin.’ At the beginning, her voice was still trembling, after a while, she gradually calmed down. Hearing Yilin’s melodious voice getting calmer and calmer, Linghu Chong could tell that she had full faith in the magic power of the scripture.

She continued, “If one were about to be murdered, and he calls Bodhisattva Guanyin’s name, the murderer’s knife and staff would break into pieces, thus protecting him from danger. If demons came to bother people, one can call Bodhisattva Guanyin’s name, then the demons wouldn’t be able to see him, let alone hurt him. If one has shackles around his body, no matter whether he is guilty or not, if he calls Bodhisattva Guanyin’s name, then all shackles would break loose and fall to the ground, he can then be freed from the restrain….”

Linghu Chong felt his amusement grow at these words and eventually let out a chuckle.

“What…what’s so funny?” Yilin asked in surprise.

“If I had known that, I wouldn’t have to learn Kung Fu,” Linghu Chong quipped. “If a villain or my personal enemy wanted to kill me, all I…I would need to do is to call upon Bodhisattva Guanyin’s name and the villain’s knife would break to pieces, and I would remain safe…safe and sound.”

“Big Brother Linghu, don’t be disrespectful to the Bodhisattva,” Yilin remonstrated. “If I don’t recite the scriptures with my full heart and faith, it would not work.”

She went on, “If fierce beasts surrounded you and you were frightened by their sharp teeth and claws, you could call Bodhisattva Guanyin’s name, and all the beasts would quickly leave. When you see venomous serpents and scorpions, you can call Bodhisattva Guanyin’s name and praise her holy power, then they will go back to their lairs. When lightening and thunders strike the ground and hail and heavy rain start pouring down, one can call Bodhisattva Guanyin’s name and praise her holy power so that the bad weather would stop and disappear. For all living creatures, there are so many difficulties, but the

holy and wonderful power from Bodhisattva Guanyin will help us get through all of them….”

Linghu Chong could hear the sincerity in her voice. Although her voice was low, she was really praying for help with all her heart and had full faith in Bodhisattva Guanyin. It seemed that she had opened her whole heart to the Bodhisattva and was supplicating and praying from deep within her heart for the Bodhisattva to show her magical power and stop Linghu Chong from suffering. She was almost saying, “Bodhisattva Guanyin, I beg you to take away all the pain and suffering from Big Brother Linghu and transfer it all to me. You can change me into a swine, or send me to hell, but please alleviate Big Brother Linghu’s misery….”

Later on, Linghu Chong could no longer discern her words, only the sound of her praying, so sincere and earnest. Unbidden tears filled Linghu Chong’s eyes. He lost his parents when he was just a child. Master and Master-Wife took good care of him, but because he was always naughty and mischievous, they gave him more punishment than kind affection; among his fellow apprentices, every one respected the Big Apprentice Brother, and dared not to go against his wishes. Little Apprentice Sister Lingshan was close to him, but had never shown such care and selfless affection that would accept all manner of misery in exchange for his safety and joy. Feelings of gratitude welled up in his chest; in his eyes, the little nun seemed to have a holy halo around her body.

Yilin’s prayers became softer and softer; in her vision, there seemed to be a real Bodhisattva Guanyin standing in front of her, waving a willow branch and spreading dew to help the needy and relieve the distressed. And every call to the Bodhisattva was a direct plea to ask for mercy for Linghu Chong. Linghu Chong’s heart was filled with gratitude and peace, and soon he fell asleep to the gentle and faithful sound of the scriptures.

Chapter 6: Hand-Washing

Translated by Lanny Lin



With a bright smile on his face, Liu Zhengfeng rolled up his sleeves and got ready to put his hands into the golden basin, when suddenly someone shouted sharply outside, "Stop!"

After Yue Buqun took Lin Pingzhi as his new apprentice, the Huashan group, led by Yue Buqun, arrived at the Liu House. When Liu Zhengfeng heard the news from his servants, he was overwhelmed by both surprise and joy – even the world renowned "Gentleman Sword" in the Martial World, Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, came himself. Wasting no time, he rushed to the door to greet, expressing his gratitude again and again. Yue Buqun appeared to

be very polite and modest. After congratulating Liu Zhengfeng with a big smile, he entered the gate with Liu Zhengfeng abreast. Priest Tian-Men, Sister Dingyi, Yu Canghai, Mr. Wen, and He Sanqi all greeted at the door of the hall.

Yu Canghai had his own interpretation. He thought to himself, "Liu Zhengfeng certainly does not have the kind of fame that will get the Head Master of Huashan Sword School to come himself. Yue Buqun must have come for me. Humph! The Five Mountains Sword Alliance does outnumber me here, but my Qingcheng Sword School is not easy to be trifled with either. If Yue Buqun starts to criticize me, I'll cut him off and question him about Linghu Chong sleeping with prostitutes. When it comes down to blows, we'll just have to fight it out." But when Yue Buqun saw him, Yue just bowed down like how he did to all the others and greeted.

"Master Yu, long time no see. You are even in better shape now."

"Mr. Yue, how are you?" Yu Canghai bowed back.

After the masters exchanged some short chats, more guests showed up at the gate. This was the day set for Liu Zhengfeng's "Gold Basin Hand Washing" ceremony. At one hour before noon, Liu Zhengfeng went back to the inner rooms to prepare himself for the ceremony, while his apprentices took over the tasks of catering the guests.

Close to noon, over five hundred more guests from distant locations flooded in. Among the guests, there was Vice-Chief of the Beggars Clan – Zhang Jin'ao, Master Xia of Zhengzhou Six Harmonies Style Studio together with his three sons-in-law, Granny Tie from the Holy Maiden Peak of the Three-Gorges, Chief of the Sea-Sand Clan from the East Sea – Pang Roar, the Dual of the River Qu – Magic Blade, Bai Ke, and Magic Brush, Lu Xisi. Some of them had known each other before, and some had only heard about each other's names, never having the chance to meet. The Big Hall soon was filled with greetings and chats, almost sounding like a big marketplace.

Priest Tian-Men and Sister Dingyi stayed inside their rooms to rest, not bothering going out to greet the crowd. They both thought, "Among the guests

here today, some have good reputations in the Martial World, but some others are obviously people with doubtful characters. Liu Zhengfeng is a Master of the Hengshan Sword School. Why doesn't he conduct himself with dignity, instead, associating himself with all kinds of people indiscriminately? Wouldn't that lower the reputation of our Five Mountains Sword Alliance?" Yue Buqun, on the other hand, was very fond of making friends. Even when many nobodies or even people with not-so-good reputations came by to chat with him, he always chatted and joked with them without any arrogant posture as the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School – a famous one in the Martial World.

Meanwhile, directed by apprentices of the Liu House, the servants had set up over two hundred banquet tables inside and outside the Big Hall. Liu Zhengfeng's relatives, subordinates, bookkeepers, and apprentices including Xiang Danian and Mi Weiyi started seating the guests. Based on the fame and seniority in the Martial World, Priest Tian-Men, the Head Master of the Taishan Sword School, should be seated at the head of the table, but since the five Sword Schools were all part of the Sword Alliance, Priest Tian-Men, Yue Buqun, and Sister Dingyi were all half-hosts as well, so it wouldn't be appropriate for them to be seated in the seats of honor. Other senior masters all yielded to each other; no one wanted to sit at the head of the table.

Suddenly two shots of blunderbuss came from outside the gate, then strains of music accompanied by drumbeats followed, together with sound of gongs clearing the way.[44] Apparently, some kind of a government official had just arrived at the gate. While the guests were still in surprise, Liu Zhengfeng rushed out in his brand new silk robe from the inner room. All the guests started congratulating and cheering for him, but Liu Zhengfeng only put out a brief salute, and walked straight out. A few moments later, he walked back in accompanying a government official in government uniform respectfully.

All the guests were stunned. "Is that official a first-class master in the Martial World?" Although his uniform looked very impressive, his sleepy eyes and unhealthy complexion all indicated that he did not have any martial arts skills. Yue Buqun and the bunch all thought, "Liu Zhengfeng is a very wealthy man in

the town of Hengshan, of course he would be making friends with the local government officials. Since today is the day of great rejoicing for Liu Zhengfeng, it would be no surprise for a local official to come by and congratulate out of perfunctory."

The official walked straight into the hall and stopped in the middle. A subordinate of his knelt down on his right leg and raised the tray in his hands high above his head. The tray was covered by a piece of yellow satin with a scroll in the middle. The official bent slightly to pick up the scroll and shouted loudly, "The Imperial Decree is here! Liu Zhengfeng, greet the Imperial Decree!"

All the guests were astonished! "Liu Zhengfeng's hand-washing and giving up using his sword were purely events only related to the Martial World. What has that got to do with the imperial government? Why did the emperor send an Imperial Decree? Could Liu Zhengfeng have plotted against the imperial government and was found guilty? That would be a crime punishable by beheading everyone in the whole family." Soon, everyone had reached the same conclusion and stood up. Some impatient ones had already grabbed their weapons. Everyone thought that since this official was announcing the Imperial Decree, then soldiers must have surrounded Liu House in all directions, and a big fight had become inevitable. As friends of Liu Zhengfeng, no one would be standing by unconcerned. In addition, when a nest got demolished, no eggs would escape unbroken; by coming to the event at Liu House, one had already become accessory of the rebels. It was already too late to stay aloof from the affair anyway. Everyone waited for Liu Zhengfeng's signal. As soon as he started yelling, all the blades in the Big Hall would chop the official into ten thousand pieces in no time. But Liu Zhengfeng appeared to be very calm and relaxed. He knelt down in front of the official, and after three kowtows, he said loudly, "Liu Zhengfeng greets the Imperial Decree. Thanks to his great Majesty!" All guests were stunned.

The official opened the scroll and started reading. "His great Majesty said: According to the report from Governor of Hunan Province, civilian Liu Zhengfeng of Hengshan County, who is zealous for the common weal and

possesses good skills in horse-riding and archery, is worth of government services. Now you will be promoted to the rank of a Sergeant. From now on, you will render your service to the Imperial Court with no reservation to repay the Majesty's kindness. His Majesty!"

"Liu Zhengfeng thanks for his Majesty's great kindness. Thanks to his great Majesty!" Liu Zhengfeng answered while kowtowing several more times. He stood up and then bowed to the official. "Many thanks for the patronization from your Excellency Zhang!" Liu Zhengfeng exclaimed.

"Congratulations! Congratulations! Sergeant Liu, we are both serving for his Majesty now. You are being too modest!" The official stroked his goatee with a smile.

"I am just a reckless man of the bush," Liu Zhengfeng said. "Today I am being promoted by the Imperial Court, of course that attributes to the great kindness of his Majesty, bringing honors to all my ancestors, but that also attributes to the outreaching patronization of the Governor's Excellency and your Excellency Zhang."

"Not really. Not really," the official said with a smile.

"Brother Fang, where are the gifts for his Excellency Zhang?" Liu Zhengfeng turned to Fang Qianju.

"They are all here." Fang Qianju turned around and took out a round tray. A brocade wrapped package lay in the middle of the tray.

Liu Zhengfeng took the tray with both of his hands. "Here are some small gifts, just to show a small portion of our respect. Please accept them, your Excellency!" he said with a big smile.

"We are all brothers, there's really no need for gifts." The Zhang-named official grinned while tipping his subordinate a wink. The subordinate by his side immediately stepped forward and took the tray. As soon as the tray was handed over, his arms lowered. Obviously the package in the tray was something heavy. It had to be gold, not silver.

Beaming with joy, the Zhang-named official excused himself, “Bro, I still have government duties to take care of. I really shouldn’t stay any longer. Come, let’s fill three cups of wine and congratulate Sergeant Liu’s promotion today. Wish him more promotions in the near future, and enjoy his Majesty’s kindness once more.” The servants had already prepared the wine. The Zhang-named official drank all three cups of wine swiftly, and then cupped his palms for a salute and walked out of the gate. Liu Zhengfeng walked him all the way out with heaps of smiles on his face. Gong sounds rose again, and shots of blunderbuss were set of by Liu House again to see the official off.

This scene was really not expected by any of the guests. They all just stared at each other, not knowing what to say. Everyone’s face was covered by embarrassment and surprise.

Although the guests that came to Liu House were neither from the dark side of the Martial World, nor rebellions, they all had some fame in the Martial World and considered themselves the type with exceptional abilities that would looked down upon local governments. When they saw how Liu Zhengfeng curried favor with the powerful, and acted so nauseatingly just for the promotion to Sergeant such a low rank from the emperor, and even bribed the official in public, some couldn’t help showing disgusts on their faces. Some elder guests all thought, “He probably bought his promotion. How much gold and silver would he have to spend to get the recommendation from the Governor? Liu Zhengfeng was a man of integrity, why would he let covetousness overcome him and buy a title so unscrupulously?”

Liu Zhengfeng walked back to his guests with a big smile and invited everyone to be seated. Since no one wanted to sit at the head of the table, the armchair in the middle was left empty. Seated at the head seat by the left was Master Xia of Six Harmonies Style Studio, the oldest one among the group, and seated at the head seat by the right was the Vice-Chief of the Beggars Clan, Zhang Jin’ao. Zhang Jin’ao, himself, did not have any outstanding fame, but since the Beggars Clan is the largest clan in the Martial World, and the Chief of the Beggars Clan, Xie Feng, had outstanding martial arts skills and fame, so

everyone showed their respect.

After everyone was seated, servants brought out various dishes and wines. Mi Weiyi took out a tea table covered by brocade. Xiang Danian held a shinning gold basin in his arms. The basin was already filled with water. Three shots of blunderbuss came from outside, followed by eight loud "bangs" from firecrackers. All the junior apprentices at the Back Hall and the Flower Hall all rushed into the Big Hall to see the fun. Liu Zhengfeng stepped to the middle of the hall with a bright smile and bowed to all directions with his palms cupped. All the guests stood up to salute him back.

"All the senior heroes, good friends and young friends," Liu Zhengfeng said in a loud voice, "thank you for coming such a long way. You really have given Liu Zhengfeng great due respect. I truly appreciate that! After today's Gold Basin Hand Washing, I will no longer be involved in the Martial World. You probably have all seen the reason why. Thanks to the great kindness of the Imperial Court, I have been awarded a small government post. As the saying goes: On his Majesty's payroll, then show his Majesty your loyalty. In the Martial World, people do things following the code of brotherhood, but to fulfill government duties, one has to follow the laws and regulations of the government to show loyalty to his Majesty. When there is a conflict between the two, it would put me in a very awkward position. Starting from now on, Liu Zhengfeng will be quitting the Martial World. If my apprentices want to submit themselves to other schools or clans, it's totally up to their own decisions. I invited all you friends here to be my eyewitnesses. Later when you come to the town of Hengshan again, you are still good friends of mine, but regarding the various kinds of dispute and clash in the Martial World, I will have to excuse myself." He bowed again after the words.

All the guests had expected those words out of him. "He really wanted to be a government official. That's his own will, and no one can force him to give that up. He has never offended me; I guess I'll just pretend there's no more Liu Sir in the Martial World," they all thought.

"Such a behavior would really hurt Hengshan Sword School's fame, no

wonder the Head Master of the Hengshan Sword School, Great Mr. Mo, did not show up. He must be quite mad about it," some also thought.

"The Five Mountains Sword Alliance has done many chivalrous acts recently, and is well respected by everyone. Now with such a behavior from Liu Zhengfeng, people probably won't say anything up front, but behind the scenes, there might be all kinds of comments," some others thought.

There were also people who took pleasure out of the scene, thinking, "And the people of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance still call themselves a chivalrous group? As soon as he has a chance to gain promotion and get rich, he kowtows to an official in such a begging manner. How could that be called chivalrous?"

These thoughts boggled each of the guests' minds. In the meantime, silence swept the entire Big Hall. Under such circumstance, everyone should have already congratulated Liu Zhengfeng, and complimented with something like "Retire with happiness and a long life," "Great courage and great wisdom," *etc.* etc., but with over a thousand guests around, none said a word.

Liu Zhengfeng turned to face the outside and said loudly, "Thanks for the respectful Master's kindness, I, Liu Zhengfeng, was taken as an apprentice of the Hengshan Sword School, and was taught martial arts skills. I am very ashamed that I could not expand the fame of the Hengshan Sword School. Luckily, our school still has apprentice brother Mo to manage things. Liu Zhengfeng is just mediocre in the school. The school wouldn't miss anything without me. Starting from now on, after I wash my hands in the gold basin, I will be focusing on my governmental career. I will never use the martial arts skills I learned from my Master to work toward my promotion. Regarding disputes and clashes in the Martial World, or arguments between schools and clans, Liu Zhengfeng will never be involved again. If I ever break my promise, I will end up like this sword."

He turned his right palm over and drew a long sword from under his robe. Bending the sword slightly with his hands, "Crack," he had broken the blade into two pieces. He simply let the two broken parts fall to the floor, and the broken blades pinned into the green brick on the floor without any noise.

Seeing the scene, everyone was well shaken. The broken blade had penetrated the brick so quietly; apparently, the sword had an extraordinarily sharp blade. For someone like Liu Zhengfeng, to break a normal steel sword with one's hands was nothing extraordinary, but to break such an outstanding sword so effortlessly, the strength required from one's fingers could only come from someone who had the skills of an elite fighter in the Martial World.

"What a pity!" Mr. Wen gave out a deep sigh. No one was clear if he was feeling sorry because of the loss of such an outstanding sword, or because such a great master as Liu Zhengfeng would willingly barter away his honor for the government's patronage.

With a bright smile on his face, Liu Zhengfeng rolled up his sleeves and got ready to put his hands into the golden basin, when suddenly someone shouted sharply outside, "Stop!"

Slightly surprised, Liu Zhengfeng looked up and saw four men in yellow robes walking through the gate. After entering the gate, the four split into groups of two and stood still on each side of the path, when a tall man, also in a yellow robe, walked straight in with his head held high and a silk flag in five colors raised high in his hand. The flag was studded with pearls and diamonds, so when the flag flapped, magnificent twinkles flashed.

While in shock, many guests recognized the silk flag: "It's the Five Mountains Sword Alliance Chief's Command Flag!"

The man walked until he was right in front of Liu Zhengfeng, and then raised the flag high in the air. "Uncle-Master Liu, here's Five Mountains Sword Alliance Chief Zuo's order: Please temporarily postpone the ceremony of Uncle-Master Liu's 'Gold Basin Hand Washing'," he announced.

Liu Zhengfeng bowed to the flag. "May I ask why Alliance Chief would give such an order?" he asked.

"I am just following my orders. I really don't know the reason behind Alliance Chief's decision. Will you, Uncle-Master Liu, please pardon me?" the man answered.

“You are being too modest! Nephew apprentice, you must be ‘Ten Thousand Feet Pine’ Nephew Shi, am I right?” he asked. Although he had a smile on his face, his voice had already slightly trembled. Obviously, even as one who had experienced many confrontations, he was greatly shocked because of the sudden change.

The man was none other than the apprentice of the Songshan Sword School, “Ten Thousand Feet Pine” Shi Dengda. Realizing that Liu Zhengfeng knew about his name and nickname, he was immensely proud.

“Apprentice Shi Dengda here shows his respect to Uncle-Master Liu,” he said, bowing slightly.

Taking a few steps forward, he also saluted Priest Tian-Men, Yue Buqun, Sister Dingyi, and the bunch. “Apprentice of Songshan Sword School here shows his respect to Uncle-Masters.” The other four men in yellow also bowed to salute.

Sister Dingyi was quite pleased. “It’s great that your Master decided to step in and stop this ceremony,” she said while slightly bowing back. “All we martial people care about is the virtue of chivalry. I think one should just enjoy the Martial World leisurely and carefree; why bother becoming a government official? But I knew brother Liu had everything arranged already and would never have listened to the old nun, me, so I simply decided to save my breath.”

Liu Zhengfeng said with a solemn face, “In the old days when our five sword schools formed the alliance, we agreed to help each other when attacking or attacked upon, to uphold justice in the Martial World as a whole. When there are matters related to the five schools, we should all follow the Alliance Chief’s command. Our five schools made this five-colored Command Flag together. It is true that when seeing the Command Flag, it’s like seeing the Alliance Chief himself, but today’s ‘Gold Basin Hand Washing’ ceremony is only my private matter. It is neither against any martial rules, nor related to the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, so I am not restricted by the Alliance Chief’s Command Flag. Nephew Shi, please tell your respectful Master that I will not follow the order and ask for his pardon.” He walked toward the gold basin.

Shi Dengda rushed forward and blocked in front of the gold basin.

“Uncle-Master Liu, my Master urged me again and again to ask Uncle-Master you to temporarily postpone your ‘Gold Basin Hand Washing’ ceremony. Master said that the Five Mountain Sword Alliance has the same root with different branches; we members are like brothers to each other. By sending out this Command Flag with the order, he was not only taking the inter-school relationship into consideration, but also to uphold the justice in the Martial World, and also for the good of Uncle-Master Liu,” he exclaimed while raising the silk flag even higher in the air.

“I am a bit confused here,” Liu Zhengfeng said. “The invitation for my Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony was sent to Mount Songshan with great manners way ahead of time. A long letter was also sent together to apprentice brother Zuo explaining everything in detail. If apprentice brother Zuo really had such good intentions, why didn’t he stop me earlier, and waited till now to stop me with the Command Flag? Obviously he wants me to go back on my words in front of all the heroes in the Martial World, so I would be laughed at by every martial people!”

“Master said that Uncle-Master Liu is a man of iron will in the Hengshan Sword School, with righteousness as broad as the sky and well respected by all fellow martial people. Master himself well admires you as well, so he exhorted us to never act with impoliteness, or to face strict punishment. Uncle-Master Liu, you have great fame spreading around the Martial World, so there’s really no worry regarding that,” Shi Dengda said.

“Chief Zuo was flattering me. I don’t have such great fame.” Liu Zhengfeng smiled.

Seeing that neither would give in, Sister Dingyi couldn’t help cutting in.

“Brother Liu, why don’t you just postpone it for a little while? Everybody here today is a good friend of yours; who would be laughing at you? Even if there are really a few jerks that are bold enough to ridicule you, you don’t have to worry about it, because I won’t let them get off.” She glanced at everyone’s face

challengingly to see who was going to be so bold to offend her fellow master in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance.

Liu Zhengfeng nodded. “Well, since Sister Dingyi also said so, let’s postpone my Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony till noon tomorrow. All of my good fiends, please stay one more day in the town of Hengshan, and wait for me to discuss this more with these nephew apprentices of the Songshan Sword School.”

Suddenly, a girl’s shouting voice came from the direction of the inner rooms. “Hey, back off! What are you doing? Who I want to play with is none of your business!”

Stunned, everyone recognized her voice. It was the young girl Qu Feiyan who confronted Yu Canghai the day before.

A man’s voice rose, “Sit down tight and shut up. I will let you go later.”

“Huh, how strange! Is this your home? Why are you blocking sister Liu and I from going to the back garden to catch butterflies?” Qu Feiyan’s voice rose again.

“Fine! If you want to go, go by yourself. Miss Liu has to stay here for a while,” the man answered.

“Sis Liu thinks you are disgusting! Why don’t you just go away and leave us alone? Sister Liu doesn’t even know you,” Qu Feiyan snapped.

Another girl’s voice came, “Sister, let’s go. Don’t pay any attention to him.”

“Miss Liu, please stay here for a while,” the man ordered.

Liu Zhengfeng’s anger started growing. “Which jerk is being bold enough to cause trouble in my house and tease my Jing’er?” he thought.

Second senior apprentice of Liu House, Mi Weiyi, rushed into the inner rooms toward the direction of the voices and saw his apprentice sister, hand in hand with Qu Feiyan, standing in the courtyard, while a young man in a yellow robe extended his arms and blocked their way. From the robe the young man was wearing, Mi Weiyi recognized him as an apprentice of the Songshan Sword

School. With anger, he faked a cough and said loudly, “Are you an apprentice brother of the Songshan Sword School? Why didn’t you take a seat in the Big Hall?”

“No need for that. I am following Alliance Chief’s order to keep an eye on Liu’s family members, and not to let anyone get away,” the man said arrogantly. His voice was not loud, but it had a clear tone of haughtiness. From his words, all the guests were stunned.

Liu Zhengfeng’s anger exploded. “What’s all this about?” he questioned Shi Dengda.

“Apprentice brother Wan, you can come out now. Watch your words; Uncle-Master Liu has already agreed to stop the Hand Washing ceremony,” Shi Dengda urged.

“Yes. That would be the best,” the man in the inner room answered. He entered the Big Hall from the inner room and bowed to Liu Zhengfeng. “Songshan apprentice Wan Daping here shows his respect to Uncle-Master Liu.”

Liu Zhengfeng’s body trembled from of anger. “How many Songshan apprentices are here today? Why don’t you all show yourselves now?” he yelled.

Right after his last word, voices of dozens of people suddenly answered in unison from above the roof, outside of the gate, around the corner of the hallway, in the backyard, and all other directions, “Sure. Songshan apprentices show their respect to Uncle-Master Liu.” The shouting of dozens of voices came at the exact same moment, loudly and unexpectedly. That really caught all the guests in the Big Hall completely off guards. The dozen people standing on the roof were all in yellow robes, but the others in the Big Hall each dressed differently, and obviously had sneaked into the Big Hall a while back to keep watch on Liu Zhengfeng in secret. They mixed themselves in the over one thousand guests, and no one had suspected them at all.

Sister Dingyi was the first one to lose her calmness. “What…what’s this about? This is too much!” she called out.

“Please excuse us, Uncle-Master Dingyi,” Shi Dengda explained. “Our Master

gave the specific order that we should stop Uncle-Master Liu's hand washing ceremony at all costs. We were afraid that Uncle-Master Liu wouldn't follow the order, so had to give offense. Please pardon us."

Right at that moment, over a dozen people walked out from the inner rooms. They were Liu Zhengfeng's wife, his two young children, and seven apprentices of the Liu House, each with a Songshan apprentice behind holding a dagger against each one's back.

"Dear friends," Liu Zhengfeng said loudly, "Liu Zhengfeng is not someone who would cling obstinately to his course, but today with such intimidation from apprentice brother Zuo, if I have to bend my will because of force, my reputation will be ruined, then why should I even live? Apprentice brother Zuo will not allow me to have my Gold Basin Hand Washing; humph, my head can be cut off, but my will can not be bent." He took a step forward and reached for the gold basin.

"Hold it!" Shi Dengda yelled out. He waved the Command Flag and blocked the way.

Reaching his left hand out, Liu Zhengfeng poked at Shi's eyes. She Dengda raised both of his arms to block when Liu Zhengfeng abruptly pulled his left hand back and poked with his right hand. With no other options, Shi Dengda had to take a step back.

After forcing Shi Dengda back, Liu Zhengfeng reached for the gold basin again, when he heard some kind of swooshing sounds from behind his back – and two people had jumped on him. Without turning around, Liu Zhengfeng threw a swift back kick with his left foot. "Bang," a Songshan apprentice flew into the air. Then he grabbed back with his right hand following the direction of the sound and grabbed at another Songshan apprentice's collar. Pulling toward the direction of the force, he lifted the second apprentice over his shoulder and threw him toward Shi Dengda. The back kick with his left foot and the back grab with his right hand were executed so swiftly and accurately that it was almost like he had eyes on his back. The unusual skills of an elite fighter were clearly shown in those moves.

In shock, no more Songshan apprentices dared to come at Liu Zhengfeng again. The Songshan apprentice behind Liu Zhengfeng's son shouted, "Uncle-Master Liu, if you don't stop right now, I will have to kill your son."

Liu Zhengfeng turned his head back and threw a glance at his son. "With so many heroes here today, if you dare to touch a single hair of my son, all you dozens of Songshan apprentices will be grounded into ten thousand pieces," he said coldly.

These were not bluffing words. If this Songshan apprentice had really hurt his young son, it would certainly arouse public indignation, and cause all of the guests to attack the Songshan apprentices, and then none of the Hengshan apprentices would make it out alive. He turned back and reached for the gold basin once again.

It seemed that no one would be able to stop Liu Zhengfeng this time, when suddenly, with a silver flash, a tiny missile flew over. Liu Zhengfeng took two steps back; "Ring," the missile hit the edge of the gold basin and knocked it down to the ground. "Clank," the gold basin flipped over and landed bottom up; water splashed all over the floor. Meanwhile, a yellow shadow jumped off the rooftop, and in a flash, had rushed by the fallen gold basin. He stomped on the gold basin; the gold basin collapsed under his foot and was flattened.

In his forties, the man had medium height. He was an extremely thin man with ugly mustaches under his nose. "Apprentice brother Liu, I've got orders from the Alliance Chief to not let you have your Gold Basin Hand Washing," he said, cupping his hands toward Liu Zhengfeng.

Liu Zhengfeng knew the man in front of him. His name was Fei Bin, and he was the fourth apprentice brother of Zuo Lengchan – the Head Master of the Songshan Sword School. His outstanding skills in "Great Songyang Palm" earned him great fame in the Martial World. Obviously, people sent by Songshan Sword School to deal with him included more than just second-generation apprentices. Since the gold basin had been destroyed, there was no way to continue the Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony. Should he fight with all his might or temporarily endure humiliation? Liu Zhengfeng could not make up his

mind. Then he quickly thought, "Even though the Songshan Sword School has the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, they are so overbearing. Among the one thousand or so heroes here today, someone had got to stand out and uphold justice." So he cupped his hand to salute back.

"Apprentice brother Fei, why didn't you join us and enjoy a cup of wine, but would rather hide on top of the roof to suffer from the sun? Probably there are even more masters from Songshan Sword School here today. Please all come out now. If you want to deal with me, apprentice brother Fei is more than enough. If you want to wipe out all these heroes here today, the power of the Songshan Sword School probably is not yet enough."

"Apprentice brother Liu," Fei Bin said with a slight smile, "you don't need to foment discord. Just to fight apprentice brother Liu you alone, I wouldn't have a chance defending myself against the 'Slight Geese Landing' Kung Fu you have just showed. The Songshan Sword School would never dare to offend the Hengshan Sword School, and would never dare to offend any hero here today either; we wouldn't even dare to just offend apprentice brother Liu. We are only here to beg apprentice brother Liu to not Wash Hands for the sake of thousands of fellow martial people's lives."

Hearing these words, everyone in the Big Hall was greatly surprised. "Whether or not Liu Zhengfeng has his Gold Basin Hand Washing, how could it affect thousands of fellow martial people's lives?" They all pondered the question.

"Well," Sister Dingyi cut in again, "brother Liu wants to wash his hands and accept that tiny sergeant title. To be frank, I really didn't approve that idea. But everybody has his own will. Heck, if he wants to win promotion and get rich, as long as he does not harm people and do not go against the chivalry side, then no one has the right to prevent him. I don't think brother Liu has the kind of ability to harm so many fellow martial people."

"Sister Dingyi," Fei Bin said, "you are a devout Buddhist, that's why you don't understand the kind of dirty tricks that are used by others. If this big conspiracy got through, then not only will countless of fellow martial people die, a lot of innocent citizens will also be greatly harmed. Please think about it, Liu Sir of the

Hengshan Sword School is a famous and well-respected hero in the Martial World. Why would he lower himself and endure the kind of ill treatment by those filthy government officials? Liu Sir already has tons of money, why would he hanker after promotion and money? There is really a sinister reason here."

"That sounds reasonable," everyone thought to himself or herself. "I have felt suspicious earlier: why would someone like Liu Sir accept such a tiny government title? How odd?"

"Apprentice brother Fei, if you want to throw maliciously slanders at me, at least make it sound right," Liu Zhengfeng said with a laugh, holding his anger back. "Other apprentice brothers of the Songshan Sword School, why don't you show yourself now?"

"Fine!" voices came from both the east side and the west side of the roof. Two yellow shadows flashed by in front of everyone's eyes and two men appeared at the entrance of the hall. The Qing-Gong they used was the exactly same type Fei Bin had used earlier when he jumped down the roof. The one standing to the east was a big fatty with broad shoulders. Sister Dingyi and others recognized him to be the second apprentice brother of the Songshan Sword School Head Master, "Tower Holding Palm" Ding Mian. The one standing to the west was a tall and thin man. He was the third apprentice of the Songshan Sword School, "Crane Hands" Lu Bai. "Hi, Liu Sir. Hi, everyone," the two cupped their hands slightly to greet. Ding Mian and Lu Bai both had great fame in the Martial World; everyone stood up to greet back.

Seeing that more and more first-class Songshan masters showed up, all had a gut feeling that this whole thing was not going to end pleasantly. Most likely Liu Zhengfeng would get the worst of it.

"Brother Liu, don't worry. All things in this world cannot go against righteousness. Even though they have an overwhelming number of guys, the friends from our Taishan Sword School, Huashan Sword School, and Heng-Shan Sword School aren't just a bunch of good-for-nothing guys either," Sister Dingyi said angrily.

“Sister Dingyi,” Liu Zhengfeng said with a wry smile, “this is so embarrassing. It is really an internal affair with my Hengshan Sword School, yet it caused worries for so many friends. It is very clear in my mind that my senior apprentice brother Mo must have complained to Alliance Chief Zuo of the Songshan Sword School, which brought so many apprentice brothers of the Songshan Sword School here to denounce my wrong deeds. Fine, fine, fine! It was my fault that I have not shown good manners to senior apprentice brother Mo. I will apologize to senior apprentice brother Mo and ask for his forgiveness.”

Fei Bin glanced around the hall, his eyes squinting, yet appearing to be bright and piercing, clearly showing his great inner energy.

“What does this have anything to do with Great Mr. Mo? Great Mr. Mo, please come out, so we can straighten this out,” he demanded.

After his words, the entire hall quieted down, but after quite a while, “Night Rain of Xiaoxiang” – Great Mr. Mo still did not step out.

Liu Zhengfeng let out a wry smile. “Everyone in the Martial World has already known that my apprentice brother Mo and I don’t get along, so I really don’t have to hide this fact. I am lucky to have been born in a rich family and inherited quite a few assets from my ancestors. My apprentice brother Mo, on the other hand, came from a very poor family. Normally speaking, even friends should be giving loans to each other, not mentioning apprentice brothers, but just because of the difference here, senior apprentice brother Mo loathed about it and never come to my home. We have not seen each other or contacted each other for years. Of course senior apprentice brother Mo would not come here today. What really ticked me off was the fact that simply with the one-sided story from my senior apprentice brother Mo, Alliance Chief Zuo had sent so many apprentice brothers here to deal with me today, even taking my wife and my children prisoner. Don’t…don’t you think you are making a fuss over a trifling matter?”

“Raise the Command Flag,” Fei Bin said to Shi Dengda.

“Yes!” Shi Dengda answered and raised the Command Flag high in the air by the side of Fei Bin.

“Apprentice brother Liu,” Fei Bin said grimly, “the matter today has nothing to do with the Head Master of the Hengshan Sword School, Great Mr. Mo. You don’t need to mix him into this. Alliance Chief Zuo has ordered us to investigate what secret collaboration does apprentice brother Liu have with the Demon Cult Chief – Dongfang Invincible, and what plot you are developing to attack our Five Mountains Sword Alliance and other chivalrous martial fellows.”

Everyone in the Big Hall was greatly stunned by those words. Many could not help but utter a cry of surprise. The Demon Cult was the ultimate enemy of all the martial people on the good side of the Martial World. The two sides had scores tracing back to a hundred year, fighting continuously all these years with exchanging triumphs. Among the thousand or so people in the Big Hall, at least half of them had old scores to settle with the Demon Cult – some lost family members in the fights, and others lost senior masters. Every time the name Demon Cult was mentioned, all would bite their lips hard with hatred. The ultimate reason why the Five Mountains sword schools had formed an alliance was to unite together to fight the Demon Cult. Demon Cult had many followers and did not lack highly skilled elite fighters; that was why even though the chivalrous schools all had unique skills of their own, they still failed to defeat the Demon Cult. Furthermore, Demon Cult Chief, Dongfang Invincible, maintained the title of “Number One in the Martial World.” His name was Invincible, and he had never lost a single fight after he completed his apprenticeship; that was simply incredible. So when everyone heard Fei Bin criticizing Liu Zhengfeng for collaborating with the Demon Cult, which did relate to everyone’s own life, the sympathy they had toward Liu Zhengfeng evaporated instantly.

“I have never seen Demon Cult Chief Dongfang Invincible before in my whole life. Where did you get the idea of the so-called collaboration and the so-called plots?” Liu Zhengfeng asked.

Fei Bin turned his head to the side and stared at his third apprentice brother Lu

Bai, waiting for him to speak.

"Apprentice brother Liu, what you just said might be a bit shallow. There's an Elder in the Demon Cult named Qu Yang. I wonder if apprentice brother Liu knows him?" Lu Bai said in a soft voice.

Liu Zhengfeng had remained calm since the beginning of the disturbance, but as soon as he heard the name "Qu Yang" mentioned, his face changed color. He shut his mouth tight and did not answer the question.

The fatty Ding Mian had not said anything since he entered the hall, but now he suddenly shouted harshly, "Do you know Qu Yang?" His voice sounded like a thunder, echoing in everyone's ears. He was a big and tall guy, yet now he seemed to be even bigger and taller in everyone's eyes, looking like a majestic giant.

Liu Zhengfeng still did not answer. Thousands of eyes stared at his face. Everyone thought the same thing – if he could not think of an answer, then he was really admitting to it.

After a long while, Liu Zhengfeng finally nodded. 'That's right! I not only know big brother Qu Yang, but also consider him the only person that knows my heart and is my best friend."

Instantly, the big hall was taken over by uproar. These words of Liu Zhengfeng caught everyone by surprise. Everyone had thought that he would at least try to deny the allegation, or only admitting that he probably had met that Qu Yang once or twice. No one expected him to claim that this Demon Cult Elder was actually his best friend.

Fei Bin let out a relaxed smile. "It's great that you admit it. A true man takes on his own responsibilities. Liu Zhengfeng, Alliance Chief Zuo has given you two options to choose from."

Liu Zhengfeng paid no attention to him as if he had not heard any word from Fei Bin. He sat down slowly with no specific expression on his face, and poured himself a cup of wine. Raising the cup to his lips, he drank the wine slowly. Everyone could see that his robe and his long sleeves remained dead still, no

trembling what's so ever. That was a good indication that he had a very good grip of himself, even in such an emergent situation. It was clearly shown that his courage and his Kung Fu skills were both first-class. Without any one of the two, he would not have behaved in such a calm way. Inwardly, everyone could not help but praise him.

"Alliance Chief Zuo said: Liu Zhengfeng is one with extraordinary talents in the Hengshan Sword School. He just made friends with the wrong kind of people and tumbled down the wrong way. We, as friends of the chivalrous side in the Martial World, only want to help him, so of course we will give him a way to correct his errors. Alliance Chief Zuo asked me to take a message to apprentice brother Liu: If you want to take this option, then within the next month, slay the Demon Cult Elder Qu Yang. Once you come back with his head, we will all forget about this incident, and be good friends and good brothers again," Fei Bin said loudly.

Everyone in the Big Hall thought, "Good and evil are mutually exclusive. Every single time when people from various heretical sects that belong to the Demon Cult meet people from the chivalrous side of the Martial World, fierce fights break out. It was not too much of a request from Alliance Chief Zuo to ask Liu Zhengfeng to kill Qu Yang to show his sincerity."

A sad smile flashed by Liu Zhengfeng's face. "Big brother Qu and I already felt like old friends when we first met," he said. "During the dozen of times when we had long chats late into the night, occasionally we would talk about the different opinions between schools and clans. He would always sigh deeply and consider such fights and conflicts unproductive and ineffective. I only made friends with big brother Qu for the sake of music. He is an expert in zither; I like to play the bamboo flute. Most of the times when we get together, we just played the zither and flute, never discussing Kung Fu skills." He paused, smiled, and then went on, "Maybe you don't believe this, but in the entire world today, I think no one plays the zither better than big brother Qu; and regarding bamboo flute skills, I also consider myself not inferior than anyone else. Although big brother Qu is a member of the Demon Cult, from the music of his zither play, I

could tell that he had noble character and the breadth of a man with integrity. Liu Zhengfeng not only admires him, but also looks up to him. Although I am just a coarse guy, I would never agree to harm such a gentleman."

Everyone was greatly surprised by these words. No one had anticipated that he actually made friends with Qu Yang all because of music. From the honest look on his face without a single trace of deceiving, one simply could not help but believe him. Since many people in the Martial World had unusual or out of the ordinary behaviors, music was well known to have fascinating power upon people; it wouldn't be a surprise to know that Liu Zhengfeng had such a hobby. People who knew the Hengshan Sword School well also thought, "Many generations of Hengshan Masters all loved music. Even the current Head Master of the Hengshan Sword School, Great Mr. Mo, has a nickname of 'Night Rain of Xiao Xiang' – a famous music title. He never lets his huqin[45] leave his side, and people described his Kung Fu as 'sword hidden in the Huqin, sword plays the music.' Then it is definitely possible that Liu Zhengfeng made friends with Qu Yang because of his love of playing the bamboo flute."

"Alliance Chief Zuo clearly knows that you made friends with Devil Qu for the sake of music based on his own investigation," Fei Bin did not object. "He said: The Demon Cult has secret and evil plots. They know that our Five Mountains Sword Alliance is gaining more and more prosperities these last couple of years, and might grow into an opponent they cannot fight. That is why they are trying all kinds of tricks to try to hurt us by fomenting discord. They tempt some with gold and treasure, others with beautiful women. Apprentice brother has been a man of integrity, so they tried to cater your tastes and sent Qu Yang to work you with music. Apprentice brother Liu! Please wake up! Don't you remember how many people on our side had been slain by the Demon Cult? Don't you see that you have fallen into evil's trap?"

"That's right!" Sister Dingyi agreed. "Apprentice brother Fei is right. The terror of the Demon Cult wasn't really because of any high level Kung Fu of theirs. It was because of their various cunning schemes that are so hard to guard against. Apprentice brother Liu, you are a man of integrity. It's all right that you

got tricked by an evil villain. You can kill Qu Yang the devil with a single blow. It's just as simple as that. Our Five Mountains Sword Alliance has the same root with different branches. You must not let the villains of the Demon Cult drive a wedge between our fellow martial friends and damage our relationship."

Priest Tian-Men nodded with concord. "Apprentice brother Liu, a gentleman's mistake is as easy to spot as the sun and the moon. Once he learns about the mistake and corrects himself, the gain suppresses the harm. All you need to do is to kill that Qu-named devil, then people in the chivalrous side will all raise their thumbs and praise, 'Liu Zhengfeng of the Hengshan Sword School is a true man who can distinguish between good and evil.' And we, as your friends, would look good too."

Liu Zhengfeng did not answer. He turned and stared right into Yue Buqun's eyes.

"Apprentice brother Yue, you are a true gentleman who can distinguish between right and wrong. Many of the masters here are forcing me to sell out my friend. What would you say?"

"Brother Liu," Yue Buqun answered, "if he were a true friend, then we martial people wouldn't even frown if we have to die for friends. But that Qu of the Demon Cult obviously has evil intent behind his smiles. With honey on his lips, he really has murder in his heart when he catered to your tastes. This kind of enemy is the evilest kind. His object is to bring disgrace and ruin upon you and destroy your family. The evil intention of him is to the extreme. If such a person can still be called a friend, then isn't it a disgrace to the definition of 'friend?' In history, there were many examples of people placing righteousness above family loyalty. Even family can be disregarded, why cannot such a big devil and a big villain that should have never be considered as a friend be disregarded?"

Hearing his theory, everyone cheered. "Mr. Yue's words have said it clearly. With friends, one of course should consider the code of honor, but with enemies, one should strike down with no mercy. Why restrict oneself with the code of honor?"

Liu Zhengfeng let out a sigh. He waited till the Big Hall quieted down before speaking again slowly.

“At the very beginning when I decided to make friends with big brother Qu, I had expected something like this to happen. After some careful observations, I came upon the conclusion that there will be a big fight between our Five Mountains Sword Alliance and the Demon Cult soon. Once the fight breaks out, there will be apprentice brothers in the alliance on one side and a good friend on the other side. It would be impossible for me to help either side. That’s why I came up with this dumb idea to have my Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony. I just wanted to tell everyone in the Martial World that Liu Zhengfeng would be leaving the Martial World and never be involved in any of the score-settling fights. I just wished I could stay out of everything, and not get involved. Buying this tiny army sergeant title was just a way to disgrace myself and hide my true intentions. But Alliance Chief Zuo is certainly resourceful. This move of mine simply could not fool him.”

Hearing his explanation, everyone finally understood. All thought, “So he really had secret intensions behind the Gold Basin Hand Washing event. I figured there would be no way that such a master of the Hengshan Sword School would be willing to accept such a tiny title from the government.” After the explanation, everyone found himself or herself having the foresight way ahead of time.

Fei Bin, Ding Mian, and Lu Bai looked at each other and all felt quite contended. “If it weren’t for apprentice brother Zuo, who saw through your conspiracy and stopped you in time, your plan would have succeeded,” they all thought.

Liu Zhengfeng continued, “For the last one hundred years, the Demon Cult and our chivalrous side have been fighting with each other back and forth. It would be impossible to go over the reasons behind all these fights. All I want is to stay away from such violent and fierce fights, and live my remaining years in a quiet place, playing the flute and teaching some kids, just like an average law abiding citizen. I think this wish of mine does not violate my school rules and

the alliance treaty of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance."

"If everyone thinks like you do, and desert on the eve of a battle, then do we just let the Demon Cult control the Martial World and harm everybody? If you wanted to stay out of this, then why didn't the Qu-named devil stay out of everything?" Fei Bin sneered.

With a slight smile, Liu Zhengfeng answered, "Big brother Qu had vowed to the ancestors of the Demon Cult right in front of my eyes a while back, promising that no matter how the Demon Cult fights with the chivalrous side, he would always stay out of it and never interfere. As long as no one attacks him, he will not attack anyone!"

"Huh, how wonderful!" Fei Bin sneered again. "What if someone from the chivalrous side does attack him?"

"Big brother Qu said that he would try his best to endure and never fight anyone for fame and victory. He would even try his best to mend the gap of misunderstanding between the two sides. Just this morning, big brother Qu sent me a message saying that Huashan apprentice Linghu Chong was wounded terribly by others, and was on the verge of dying. It was him who took the initiative and saved Linghu Chong."

Noises broke out in the crowd again, especially among ones belonging to the Huashan Sword School, Heng-Shan Sword School, and Qingcheng Sword School, who immediately started whispering to each other's ears. Yue Lingshan from the Huashan Sword School could not help asking, "Uncle-Master Liu, where is my big apprentice brother? Is it really…that Qu-named…Qu-named senior master who saved his life?"

"If big brother Qu said so, then of course it's true," Liu Zhengfeng answered. "When you see nephew Linghu later, you can ask him yourself."

"What's so strange about that?" Fei Bin mocked. "Demon Cult members always try to foment discord, using any means they could get their hands on. If he could use every possible means to draw you in, of course he would use every possible means to draw a Huashan apprentice. Maybe Linghu Chong would feel

so grateful and want to return the favor. Then we would have another traitor in our Five Mountains Sword Alliance." He then turned to Yue Buqun and explained, "Apprentice brother Yue, I am just using this as a way of analogy. Please don't mind."

"I don't mind," Yue Buqun answered with a smile.

"Apprentice brother Fei," Liu Zhengfeng raised his eyebrows and asked loudly, "you said another traitor. What do you mean by 'another'?"

Fei Bin sneered, "You understand it very well. Do I still need to explain?"

"Humph, so are you calling me a traitor of my own school?" Liu Zhengfeng yelled. "It's my private matter who I want to make friends with. It's none of other people's business. Liu Zhengfeng does not dare to betray my Master and my Hengshan Sword School. I'll send the word 'traitor' right back to you."

Before, he had acted with good manners, just like a local gentleman, rich yet rustic. But now, he had shown a quite different image – one filled with vitality and heroic spirit. Seeing his tit for tat argument with Fei Bin and not giving away any ground, everyone admired his courage.

"I suppose apprentice brother Liu is not interested with this option, right? Are you sure you don't want to rid the evil and kill that big devil Qu Yang?" Fei Bin asked.

"If Alliance Chief Zuo has given you the order, then go ahead, apprentice brother Fei, go ahead and kill my entire family!" Liu Zhengfeng answered with no hesitation.

"Are you thinking that just because so many heroes are visiting you in your home, our Five Mountains Sword Alliance would have scruples and give up on purifying our own group?" Fei Bin mocked.

"Come here!" he beckoned Shi Dengda.

"Yes!" Shi Dengda answered and took three steps forward.

Fei Bin took the five-colored Command Flag from Shi and raised it high. "Liu Zhengfeng, listen carefully: Alliance Chief Zuo has ordered that if you don't

agree to kill Qu Yang within a month, then the Five Mountains Sword Alliance will have no choice but to purify our own group. To prevent any future problem, we will have to rid the branches together with the root. You'd better think it through!"

Liu Zhengfeng let out a sad smile. "When I make a friend, I value the utter devotion. How could I kill a friend in exchange for my own protection? Since Alliance Chief Zuo does not allow this, I, Liu Zhengfeng, with only little power and backing, do not even stand a chance resisting Alliance Chief Zuo. Your Songshan Sword School has planned everything beforehand, probably even got my coffin ready. If you want to do it, then go ahead and do it. What are you waiting for?"

Fei Bin waved the Command Flag and said in a loud voice, "Apprentice brother Tian-Men of the Taishan Sword School, Apprentice brother Yue of the Huashan Sword School, Sister Dingyi of the Heng-Shan Sword School, and apprentice brothers and nephew apprentices of the Hengshan Sword School, according to Alliance Chief Zuo's order: Good and evil can never coexist. The Demon Cult has heaps of scores with our Five Mountains Sword Alliance; the hatred is as deep as the ocean. Liu Zhengfeng associated himself with the devil and submitted himself to the enemy. Everyone in our Five Mountains Sword Alliance is obligated to attack him and kill him. All the ones that will follow the order please stand to the left."

Priest Tian-Men stood up and strode to the left without even looking at Liu Zhengfeng. Priest Tian-Men's Master had been slain by a female Demon Cult Elder, which was why he hated the Demon Cult to the very marrow of his bones. Once he walked to the left side, all his apprentices followed him over.

"Brother Liu," Yue Buqun stood up, "all you need to do is nod, and I, Yue Buqun, will take care of the business of Qu Yang for you. You said that a true man should not betray his friends, but is Qu Yang your only friend in this world? Aren't people in our Five Mountains Sword Alliance and many people here today your friends too? The thousands of fellow martial people here traveled long ways to congratulate you sincerely when they heard you were

having your Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony. They've shown their friendship. Don't the lives of your entire family, kindness and friendship of your friends in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, and the friendship of those hundreds of fellow martial people outweigh this one individual Qu Yang?"

Slowly shaking his head, Liu Zhengfeng answered, "Apprentice brother Yue, you are a scholar, you should have heard the saying of 'a true man has things he will not do.' I am grateful for your advice and your good words. When others force me to kill Qu Yang, I won't agree. Just like when someone forces me to kill you, apprentice brother Yue, or any one of the friends here, I would never agree even if my entire family would be wiped out as the consequence. It's true that big brother Qu is a good friend of mine, but apprentice brother Yue is also a good friend of mine. If big brother Qu has ever even mentioned about plotting against any friend of mine in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, I would have looked down upon his character and not consider him a friend." These words were said in a very sincere way and moved many people in the Big Hall. Brotherhood was a greatly valued virtue in the Martial World, so even though these martial people did not like the fact that Liu Zhengfeng defended his relationship with Qu Yang, they all praised Liu Zhengfeng inwardly.

Yue Buqun shook his head and argued, "Brother Liu, you said it wrong. Your valuing of brotherhood is very admirable, but you did not distinguish between good and evil or right and wrong. The Demon Cult committed countless number of crimes and harmed many gentlemen and innocent people. Just for the sake of your interest in music, giving your wholehearted devotion to him is a terrible misunderstanding of the definition of 'brotherhood'."

"Apprentice brother Yue, you don't play any instrument, that's why you don't understand me here," Liu Zhengfeng explained with a smile. "A person can lie using words, but the sound of flute or zither is directly from one's heart and can't lie. Big brother Qu and I have played the flute and zither together. We fully understand each other wholeheartedly. I can guarantee you with my life and my reputation that although big brother Qu is a member of the Demon Cult, he does not have any trace of evil of the Demon Cult."

With a long sigh, Yue Buqun walked by Priest Tian-Men's side. Lau Denuo, Yue Lingshan, Lu Dayou, and the bunch all followed him over.

Sister Dingyi stared at Liu Zhengfeng. "Starting from now on, should I call you brother Liu or Liu Zhengfeng?" she asked.

"Liu Zhengfeng is bound to die any minute now. Sister, there's no need for either one," Liu Zhengfeng replied with a wry smile.

Sister Dingyi put her palms together, forming a Buddhist greeting posture, and then prayed, "May Buddha preserve us!" She slowly walked by Yue Buqun, saying, "The Demon has added more crimes into the world. What a sin, what a sin!" Her apprentices also followed her over.

"This is the personal matter of Liu Zhengfeng. It has nothing to do with other people. Apprentices of Hengshan Sword School, if you don't want to follow the traitor, you can stand to the left side too," Fei Bin declared.

After a short silence, a young man murmured, "Uncle-Master Liu, please pardon us apprentices." Then thirty or so Hengshan apprentices walked to the side of the nuns of the Heng-Shan Sword School. Those were all Liu Zhengfeng's nephew apprentices, since none of the other senior masters of the Hengshan Sword School came to the ceremony.

"Apprentices of Liu House stand to the left side too," Fei Bin yelled again.

Xiang Danian answered loudly, "We value the grace of our Master. We will never betray him. We as apprentices of Liu will always be with our beloved Master, dead or alive."

Warm tears swamped Liu Zhengfeng's eyes. "Good, good! Danian, your words are already great comforts for your Master. Why don't you all walk over? It was your Master, I, who made the friend. It has nothing to do with any of you."

With a loud "clank" sound, Mi Weiyi drew his sword out. "The Liu House undoubtedly is no match for the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. But what more could we lose other than our lives. Whoever wants to harm my Master has to

kill me first," he exclaimed while standing right in front of Liu Zhengfeng, blocking him protectively.

Ding Mian waved his left hand slightly, and a silver flash zipped out in extreme speed. In shock, Liu Zhengfeng pushed Mi Weiyi's right shoulder hurriedly using his inner energy. Mi Weiyi was pushed to the left, and the silver flash headed directly toward Liu Zhengfeng's chest. Eager to protect his Master, Xiang Danian jumped forth to block, and the silver needle penetrated his heart squarely. He only had enough time to let out a painful groan before falling dead. Liu Zhengfeng lifted Xiang's body with his left arm and checked his breath. He then turned to Ding Mian. "Ding second, it is your Songshan Sword School who has killed my apprentice first!"

"Precisely. We killed first. So what?" Ding Mian mocked coldly.

Liu Zhengfeng picked up Xiang Danian's body with both arms; it seemed as if he was going to throw the body toward Ding Mian. Ding Mian had long known that the Hengshan Sword School inner power style had some unique traits. Liu Zhengfeng was a first-class elite fighter in the Hengshan Sword School; from the way he gathered his strength, Ding Mian could tell that the strength of the throw must be tremendous, so he gathered his inner energy and readied himself to catch the body, so he could throw it right back. Although it appeared that Liu Zhengfeng picked up the body to throw it forward, he suddenly jumped to the side, holding the body in his hands and sent it toward Fei Bin's chest. The change was so swift and dramatic that Fei Bin was caught by a total surprise. He had to raise both of his palms and blocked the body with double knife hands, when suddenly he felt numbness from his ribs – Liu Zhengfeng had sealed his acupoints.

After the successful move, Liu Zhengfeng grabbed the Command Flag from Fei Bin's grip using his left hand, while drawing Fei's sword with his right hand and placed the blade right on Fei Bin's throat. Then he struck Fei Bin's back on multiple spots with his left elbow rapidly and sealed another three acupoints on Fei's back. He moved so fast that he completed the entire series of moves before Xiang Danian's body even landed on the floor.

After Fei Bin was taken prisoner and the Command Flag exchanged hands, everyone finally realized that the moves Liu Zhengfeng used were from the unique Kung Fu of the Hengshan Sword School called “Magical Thirteen Phantom Stances of Hengshan Mist.” People had heard about it for a long time, and now they were lucky enough to actually see it with their own eyes. Yue Buqun had heard from his Master many years ago that a great master from the last generation of the Hengshan Sword School created the “Magical Thirteen Phantom Stances of Hengshan Mist.” That great master made a living by traveling around performing magic shows. Magic tricks relied on illusions and redirecting audiences’ attentions. When that great master was in his old age, his Kung Fu skills became higher, and so did his skills with magic tricks. He was actually able to use his inner energy and Kung Fu skills in his magic tricks, entertaining a great amount of street audiences. Then later, he was able to merge his magic trick skills into his Kung Fu skills. He was a funny guy and created this set of Kung Fu just for fun, having no idea that the set of Kung Fu would become one of the three unique sets of Hengshan Kung Fu skills. Although the set of Kung Fu had very odd and unexpected moves, it actually was not very useful in a real serious fight because when masters fight, each would be guarding himself carefully and protect his own vital parts well, thus rendering these tricky and flashing moves useless. That was why even the Hengshan Sword School didn’t emphasize on teaching it. If the apprentice appeared to be a flashy one, then the master would not teach him that set of Kung Fu so that the apprentice won’t be relying on fake and flashy moves and lose focus with the real rudimentary type of Kung Fu skills. Liu Zhengfeng was the quiet and deep type. After he learned that set of Kung Fu from his Master, he had not used it ever until today. Now when he used it in such an emergent situation, it actually worked wonders and helped him take control of the notable “Great Songyang Palm” Fei Bin, whose real Kung Fu skills were definitely no less than his.

Lin Zhengfeng held the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword alliance high with his right hand and grabbed tight the sword that was on Fei Bin’s throat with his left hand, then said firmly, “Apprentice brother Ding, apprentice brother Lu, I made bold and took the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword

Alliance. I dare not threaten the two of you; I just want to beg mercy from you."

Ding Mian and Lu Bai looked at each other, both thinking, "Since apprentice brother Fei had fallen for his tricky attack, we'd better listen to what he has to say first."

"What kind of mercy?" Ding Mian asked.

"Would you two please take a message to Alliance Chief Zuo for me," Liu Zhengfeng said, "Asking for his permission to let me and my family to withdraw from civilization and live in solitude without ever getting involved in any matter of the Martial World? I will not see big brother Qu Yang ever again, and I will be leaving you, the apprentice brothers and friends here today…as well. I will bring my family and my apprentices to leave the country and live a hermit's life. As long as I am alive, we will never step on the ground of China again."

"Apprentice brother Lu and I can not make a decision on that. We will have to report this to apprentice brother Zuo to get his judgment," Ding Mian hesitated for a second and then replied.

"We have the Head Masters of the Taishan Sword School and the Huashan Sword School here, plus Sister Dingyi from the Heng-Shan Sword School, who should be able to make a decision representing her Head Master apprentice sister. In addition, all the fellow martial people and heroes here today can act as eye witnesses," Liu Zhengfeng argued. He glanced around everybody and said in a deep voice, "I am begging for a favor from all you friends. Please let me save my family and my apprentices while not betraying my belief in brotherhood."

Sister Dingyi was the type who acted tough with a hot-temper, yet very kind in one's heart. She first agreed.

"That would be great, thus we won't damage our good relationship. Apprentice brother Ding and apprentice brother Lu, let's agree to brother Liu. Since he wouldn't be seeing any member of the Demon Cult, and he will be far away, it'll be like there isn't a Liu Zhengfeng in this world at all. Why do we have to commit more killing?"

"That sounds good." Priest Tian-Men also nodded. "Brother Yue, what do you

think?”

“Brother Liu’s words are as solid as a mountain,” Yue Buqun said. “If he said so, of course we all trust him. Come on! Let’s turn hostility into friendship. Brother Liu, you set brother Fei free, and then we’ll all drink a cup of friendly wine. Tomorrow morning, you can take your family and your apprentices to leave the town of Hengshan!”

“Even the Head Masters of Taishan and Huashan said so, plus Sister Dingyi is also pleading for Liu Zhengfeng, how can we dare to oppose? But because apprentice brother Fei fell for Liu Zhengfeng’s tricks, if we just agreed like that, everyone in the Martial World will be saying that the Songshan Sword School was taken hostage by Liu Zhengfeng and had to give in. When rumors like this spreads out, what would happen to our reputation?” Lu Bai said.

“It is brother Liu who is begging for mercy from the Songshan Sword School. He wasn’t threatening or forcing you. Talk about ‘give in’, it is Liu Zhengfeng who is giving in, not the Songshan Sword School. And you’ve already killed an apprentice of the Liu House,” Sister Dingyi said.

“Di Xiu, get ready!” Lu Bai said after a disgruntled snort.

“Yes!” Songshan apprentice Di Xiu answered. He pushed the short sword in his hand forward a bit, until the tip of the blade penetrated the cloth and reached Liu Zhengfeng’s eldest son’s back muscle.

“Liu Zhengfeng, if you want to beg for mercy, then come back with us to Mount Songshan and see Alliance Chief Zuo. You can beg him for mercy yourself. We are just following orders. We can’t make decisions. Give me back the Command Flag and set my apprentice brother Fei free,” Lu Bai demanded.

With a sad smile, Liu Zhengfeng turned to his son. “Son, are you afraid to die?”

“I am with you, Dad. I am not afraid!” Liu’s son exclaimed.

“Good kid!” Liu Zhengfeng said.

“Kill him!” Lu Bai yelled.

Di Xiu pushed the sword forward. The tip of the short sword went all the way until it penetrated the heart. Then he pulled the short sword out as Liu's son collapsed onto the floor, blood gushing out from the wound on his back.

Madam Liu, Liu Zhengfeng's wife, screamed and rushed by her son's body.

"Kill her too!" Lu Bai yelled again.

Di Xiu thrust his sword forward. The blade penetrated Madam's Liu's back.

Sister Dingyi's anger exploded. "Swoosh," she slammed her palm toward Di Xiu while swearing, "You monster!" Ding Mian rushed forward and also pushed out with his palm. The two palms met squarely in the midair, sending Sister Dingyi stumbling three steps back. Sister Dingyi felt a great pain from her chest, with blood gushing out of her throat into her mouth. She was the type that would always try to best others, so she immediately swallowed the blood back in, not showing any weakness.

"Thanks for your grace!" Ding Mian smirked.

Sister Dingyi's Kung Fu was not specialized in her palm strength; in addition, she didn't put a lot of strength into her palm strike toward Di Xiu, because she, as a senior, did not want to kill Di Xiu, a junior. But when Ding Mian suddenly took on her palm strike with all his strength, and at the time when the two palms met, it was already too late for Sister Dingyi to add more strength to the strike. Ding Mian's strength overwhelmed Sister Dingyi like a huge wave and injured her badly. In great rage, Sister Dingyi wanted to strike out with her palm again, but when she tried to gather her inner energy, great pain came from her abdomen. It almost felt like that someone was cutting her flesh with a knife. Realizing how severely she had been injured, she clearly knew that she would have no chance of winning the fight with Ding Mian today, so she beckoned her apprentices and said angrily, "Let's go!" then strode out of the gate. All her apprentices followed her.

"Kill more!" Lu Bai yelled again.

Two Songshan apprentices pushed their short swords forward and killed two more apprentices of Liu House.

“Listen carefully, Liu House apprentices,” Lu Bai said. “If you want to live, then kneel down now and beg for mercy. Whoever is willing to condemn Liu Zhengfeng, his life will be spared.”

“You filthy murderers! Your Songshan Sword School is ten thousand times eviler than the Demon Cult!” Liu Zhengfeng’s daughter Liu Jing swore angrily.

“Kill!” Lu Bai yelled.

Wan Daping raised his long sword and chopped downward. The blade cut through Liu Jing’s right shoulder and went all the way down to her waist. Shi Dengda and other Songshan apprentices also thrust out their swords and killed the Liu House apprentices whose acupoints were sealed earlier.

Although the people in the Big Hall were used to dangerous lives, yet all were greatly shocked by the massacre scene. Some senior masters had wanted to call them to stop, but the Songshan Sword School had acted so fast that within the moment of hesitation, the hall had been filled with dead bodies. Everyone then thought, “Good and evil can never coexist. The Songshan Sword School’s acts weren’t really for any private score they have with Liu Zhengfeng, but acts to fight with the Demon Cult. Although the acts were kind of brutal, one really could not criticize them. In addition, at the moment, the Songshan Sword School had controlled the entire situation, even Sister Dingyi took a hit and left the scene, and Priest Tian-Men, Yue Buqun, and other first-class masters all kept their silence. This was the matter within the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. If any outsider pokes his nose into other people’s business and jumps out to stir things up, he would be planting a dangerous seed for himself, and might get killed because of that. The best thing to do was to be worldly wise and play safe.”

By then, among Liu House relatives and apprentices, all was left was Liu Qin, Liu Zhengfeng’s youngest and favorite fifteen-year old son.

“Ask this lad whether he wants to beg for mercy. If he refuses, then cut his nose off first, then his ears, and then cut out his eyeballs. Let him have the pain in small dozes,” Lu Bai directed Shi Dengda.

“Sure!” Shi Dengda answered. He turned to Liu Qin and asked, “Are you going to beg for mercy?”

Liu Qin’s face was as white as a sheet. He couldn’t help his trembling.

“Good kid, see how tough you brother and sister were. It’s only death, nothing to be scared of,” Liu Zhengfeng said.

“But…Dad,” Liu Qin said with a trembling voice, “they want to…want to cut off my nose, and cut out…cut out my eyeballs….”

Liu Zhengfeng let out a laugh. “By now, do you still think they will let us live?”

“Dad, can’t you…can’t you just agree to kill Uncle…Uncle Qu…?” Liu Qin begged.

Liu Zhengfeng was enraged. “Garbage! You little bloody pig, what did you say?” he yelled.

Shi Dengda raised his long sword and moved the tip of the sword back and forth right in front of Liu Qin’s nose. “Hey lad, I am going to cut down now if you don’t kneel down and beg for mercy. One…two….”

Before the word “three” came out of Shi’s mouth, Liu Qin had already knelt down on the floor. Trembling hard, he begged, “Don’t…don’t kill me….”

“Good! We’ll spare you, only after you condemn Liu Zhengfeng in front of all the people here today.” Lu Bai laughed.

Liu Qin stared at his father, his eyes filled with begging and pleading. Liu Zhengfeng had been able to maintain his calmness all the way through; even when his wife and children were slain right in front of his eyes, he kept a still face, but now he simply could not hold his anger. “You little bloody pig, aren’t you ashamed of yourself right in front of your mother’s dead body?” he yelled loudly.

Seeing his mother, brother and sister’s bodies lying in the blood pool, also seeing Shi Dengda’s long sword moving back and forth right in front of his face, Liu Qin was scared out of his wits.

“Please, please, I beg of you to spare my life, and spare…spare my dad’s life,” he said to Lu Bai.

“Your dad collaborated with the villains in the Demon Cult. Do you think it’s right or wrong?” Lu Bai pressed.

“It’s…wrong!” Liu Qin murmured.

“Should this kind of people be executed?” Lu Bai asked.

Liu Qin lowered his head and dared not to answer.

“The lad doesn’t want to talk. Kill him!” Lu Bai ordered.

“Yes!” Shi Dengda answered. Knowing that Lu Bai really meant to just scare the kid, he raised his sword high and pretended to be chopping down.

“Yes…yes, they should!” Liu Qin muttered immediately.

“Very good! Starting from now on, you are not part of the Hengshan Sword School, neither are you Liu Zhengfeng’s son any more. I spare your life,” Lu Bai declared.

Liu Qin just remained in his kneeling position, not able to stand up with his scared to weak legs. Seeing that, people in the hall could not help but feel ashamed for him. Some turned their heads away, not able to bare themselves to such an embarrassing scene.

Liu Zhengfeng let out a long sigh. “Lu, you won!” Waving his right hand, he threw the Command Flag toward Lu Bai, at the meanwhile, raised his left leg and kicked Fei Bin away. “I’ll finish it off on my own. No need for more killing now,” he said loud and clear, turning the sword in his left hand and slashed it toward his own throat.

Right at the instant, a shadow in black robe glided down from underneath the eaves. The shadow moved as swift as a breeze and quickly grabbed onto Liu Zhengfeng’s left wrist. “A wise man can wait ten years for his revenge. Let’s go!” the shadow yelled out loud. His right hand waved in a circular motion toward his back, and then dragged Liu Zhengfeng toward the outside hurriedly.

“Big brother Qu…you…!” Liu Zhengfeng blurred out in shock.

Hearing the words “big brother Qu,” everyone instantly realized that the man in black robe was none other than the Demon Cult Elder Qu Yang. All felt a shiver inside.

“No time for discussion!” Qu Yang shouted, running even faster. But only after running three steps, Ding Mian and Lu Bai’s four palms had arrived toward the backs of the two.

“Run! Hurry!” Qu Yang yelled to Liu Zhengfeng, pushing hard on Liu Zhengfeng’s back with his palm while gathering his own inner energy around his back. He took the solid strikes of the combination of Ding Mian and Lu Bai, the two first-class elite fighters, squarely on his back. “Bang!” Qu Yang’s body was knocked flying in the air toward the gate.

Still in the air, Qu Yang spat out a spray of blood toward the back while waving his hands continuously. A cluster of black needles rained toward everybody behind him.

“Those are the Black Blood Sacred Needles, move away fast!” Ding Mian shouted while dodging to the side hurriedly.

Seeing the cluster of black needles flying toward them and knowing the great fame of the Black Blood Sacred Needles of the Demon Cult, people in the hall were all astounded. The crowd became a mass. In chaos, voices from dozens of people echoed in the hall: “Ouch!” “Wow!” Since there was quite a crowd in the hall and the Black Blood Sacred Needles were in great amount and great speed, the poisonous needles hit many. In the hubbub, Qu Yang and Liu Zhengfeng had escaped.

Chapter 7: Music Score

Translated by Lanny Lin



Three shadows walked out from behind the big rock. Under the dim starlight, it appeared to be two tall ones and a short one. The tall ones were two guys and the short one was a girl.

Although Linghu Chong's injuries were very severe, with the help of the Heng-Shan Sword School's great medicines, "Heavenly Connecting Glue" applied outside and "White Cloud Bear Gallbladder Pills" taken orally, after just a day and two nights' sleep by the waterfall, his wounds had started to heal. The fact that Linghu Chong was a strong man still in his youth, and the good amount of inner energy developed from his martial arts training both contributed greatly to his fast recovery.

During the day and two nights, all they had were watermelons. Linghu Chong had begged Yilin to catch some fish or wild rabbits for a change, but she would not give any ground, saying that only because of the blessing from the Buddha, had Linghu Chong been able to narrowly escape from death, and it would be the best if he would become a vegetarian for a few years to show his grace to the Buddha. There was absolutely no way that she would violate the prohibition of killing. Linghu Chong laughed at her pedantry, yet could not force her, so he had no choice but to give it up.

It was already dark. The two of them rested with their back against a big rock and looked at the many fireflies flying in and out of the bushes. The flickering of the many fireflies painted a beautiful picture of the midsummer night.

“In the summer before the last one, I once caught thousands of fireflies and placed them in dozens of gauze bags to hang in the room. That was a lot of fun!” Linghu Chong said.

Figuring with his kind of temper, he would never have made dozens of gauze bags out of his own will, Yilin asked, “It was your little apprentice sister, who had asked you to catch those fireflies, wasn’t it?”

“You are smart!” Linghu Chong smiled. “You got it right! How did you know my little apprentice sister asked me to do it?”

“You have such a hot-temper; besides, you are no longer a kid. How could you have such patience to catch thousands of fireflies just for fun?” Yilin answered with a smile. “So what happened afterwards?” she asked.

“Little apprentice sister hung all these gauze bags inside her bed curtains. She said that with so many twinkling around her bed, she would feel like sleeping above clouds. Every time when she opened her eyes, she would be seeing stars all around her.”

“Your little apprentice sister certainly knows how to have fun. And she also got you, the apprentice brother, to join in with her. If she had wanted you to catch the stars in the sky, you probably would have agreed just the same,” Yilin commented.

“Talk about catching the stars in the sky, that was actually the reason why we caught so many fireflies,” Linghu Chong explained. “That night, she and I went out to enjoy the cool breezes of the night. When she saw the twinkling stars in the sky, little apprentice sister took a deep breath. ‘It’s too bad that a bit later I’ll have to go to bed,” she said. ‘I’d rather sleep outside under the night sky, so when I wake up in the middle of the night, I’ll see all the stars blinking at me. That’ll be so much fun! But Mother definitely won’t allow that to happen.’ So I suggested, ‘Why don’t I go catch some fireflies, and then put them in your bed curtain. They would look just like stars.’”

“So it was your idea after all,” Yilin murmured gently.

“‘But the fireflies would be flying in all directions,’ Little apprentice sister said. ‘It would be so annoying if some of them landed on my face. I got it! Why don’t I sew some gauze bags and put the fireflies in those.’ So she started making gauze bags while I worked on catching fireflies. We worked for an entire day and an entire night to get everything ready. It was too bad that we were only able to enjoy it for the first night. By the second night, the fireflies all died.”

Yilin’s body shook at these words. “All the thousands of fireflies died? How… how could you…?” her voice quivered.

Linghu Chong grinned. “You wanted to say that we were too cruel, didn’t you? Ah, you are a Buddhist with a very kind heart. When it gets cold, those fireflies would have frozen to death, anyway. They only died a couple days earlier. What’s the big deal?”

“Actually it’s no different for us human beings,” after a long silence, Yilin finally said quietly. “Some will die sooner, and some will die later. Whether one dies sooner or later, he will die eventually. Buddha says that no one can escape the suffering of death, either by old age or by illness. It is so difficult to understand the ultimate truth regard the cycle of life.”

“Well said! That’s why there’s no need for you to worry about all those rules and regulations, such as no killing, no stealing, and so on. If the Buddha had to watch out for every little thing out there, he would probably become exhausted,”

Linghu Chong exclaimed.

Speechless, Yilin turned her head away, just as a shooting star flashed across the night sky to their left, leaving a long beautiful light trail.

“Apprentice sister Yijing once said, that when you see a shooting star, if you can tie a knot using the ribbon on your robe and make a wish at the same time, then the wish will come true, as long as you can finish both of them before the shooting star disappears. Do you think that’s real?” Yilin asked.

“I don’t know,” Linghu Chong answered. “Why don’t we give it a try? But I don’t think I can be that fast.” He picked up the ribbon of his robe. “Better get ready yourself. One second slower, you wouldn’t make it.”

Yilin picked up the ribbon of her robe and gazed at the night sky. Shooting stars were not rare in summer nights. Only a few minutes later, another one streaked across the sky. In a flash, it had vanished. Yilin only had enough time to move a finger, and the shooting star was already gone. “Ah.” She let out a gentle cry and then waited again. Soon, another shooting star appeared. It streaked from the west to the east and lasted a short while. Yilin had very quick fingers and actually tied a knot in time.

“Remarkable! Excellent! You finished the knot! Buddha Guanyin will surely bless you and make your wish come true!” Linghu Chong cheered.

“All I thought about was how to tie the knot in time. I forgot to make a wish.” Yilin heaved a sigh.

“You’d better think of your wish ahead of time.” Linghu Chong grinned. “Recite it a few times in your heart, so you won’t forget to make your wish when you tie the knot.”

“What should I wish for? What should I wish for?” holding the ribbon in her hands, Yilin thought inwardly. She glanced at Linghu Chong and suddenly flushed, immediately jerking her head around. By then several more shooting stars had streaked across the star-strewn indigo sky.

“Oops, another one! Wow, that was a long one. Did you tie the knot in time?

You had enough time for that one," Linghu Chong shouted in excitement.

But Yilin's mind was as confused as a tangled skein. Deep in her heart, she had a vague wish, but that was a wish that she didn't even dare to think of, not to mention asking the Buddha to grant the wish. Her heart thumped hard as the feeling of unspeakable fear mingled with unspeakable joy washed over her. Then she heard Linghu Chong's voice.

"Have you gotten your wish yet?"

Yilin asked herself gently in her heart, "What should I wish for? What should I wish for?" Raising her head slightly and watching one shooting star after another flashing across the night sky, she found herself lost in thought.

"You are not gonna tell me, are you? Let me guess." Linghu Chong grinned.

"No, no, don't!" Yilin objected in a hurry.

"It's alright! Let me give it three tries, and see if I can get it." Linghu Chong said with an even bigger grin on his face.

"If you don't stop, I am leaving." Yilin stood up.

Linghu Chong burst into laughter. "Fine, I'll stop. There's nothing embarrassing about wishing to be the Head Master of the Heng-Shan Sword School."

Yilin was caught by surprise. "He…he thought I wanted to be the Head Master of the Heng-Shan Sword School? I never thought of anything like that. How would I ever be capable of being a Head Master?" she thought to herself.

Suddenly, the dim sound of a string instrument floated in from a distance. It seemed that someone was playing a zither. Linghu Chong and Yilin exchanged a surprised look, both taken aback: "Why would someone play the zither in such wilderness?"

The sound of the zither continued, smooth and graceful, and moments later, a few subdued sounds of a bamboo flute started playing accompanying the zither music. The sound of the seven-stringed zither was pastel and placid, when blended with the clear and elegant flute play, the tone seemed to have become

even more soothing and touching. The music was played as though the zither and the flute were holding an intimate conversation, and gradually, the sound of music came closer and closer.

“Playing music here at this moment is kind of odd,” Linghu Chong leaned toward Yilin and whispered to her ear. “I am afraid they might be hostile. No matter what happens, don’t make any noise.” Yilin nodded.

The sound of the zither gradually become louder and more sonorous, while the sound of the flute became lower and deeper, but the notes played by the flute were low yet unceasing, almost like a silk thread swaying in the breeze, incessant and soul stirring.

Amid the music play, three shadows walked out from behind the big rock following a small path. At the moment, a shallow cloud blocked the moon, so everything was enveloped in a shade of blur, and Linghu Chong could vaguely tell that the group consisted of two tall ones and a short one. The tall ones were two men, and the short one was a girl. The two men walked by a big rock in easy ambles and sat down, one playing the zither and one playing the flute. Quietly, the girl stood by the side of the zither-playing man. Slowly, Linghu Chong retracted himself back into hiding behind the rock wall, afraid that those three might see him. The melodious play of zither and flute continued in great harmony.

“There’s a waterfall right next by, yet the thundering of the falling water still cannot cover the soft and smooth music,” Linghu Chong thought. “These two players’ inner energy must have reached a remarkable height. Oh, I see. The sound of the waterfall is exactly the reason why they came here to play the music. It has gotten nothing to do with us.” At that thought, he felt more relaxed.

Suddenly, the sound of the zither turned loud and forceful, with the implication of battle and fights, but the flute play remained elegant and graceful. After a while, the zither play also turned mild and gentle, and both the zither and the flute switched between high notes and low notes back and forth. All of a sudden, the sounds of both the zither and the flute changed completely, as

though there were many zithers and many flutes playing together in an orchestra. Although the music had changed into something magnificent with many complex florid notes, each tone and cadence stayed clear and meaningful and the melody remained pleasing and moving. Linghu Chong could feel that his mind had been completed captured by the music, and almost couldn't help but stand up. After another while, the tone of the zither and the flute changed again. This time the flute took over the lead and the zither simply accompanied with soothing chords. Soon, the sound of the flute play ascended higher and higher. Out of nowhere, the feelings of grieve and sadness rose and washed over Linghu Chong's heart. He turned to look at Yilin, only to find tears rolling down her cheeks like streams. A loud "ring" echoed suddenly, then the zither and the flute fell silent at the exact same instant. Silence swept across in all directions; all there left were the moon, shinning high and bright in the indigo sky, casting still shadows from the endless of trees on the ground.

A voice said slowly, "Brother Liu, it must be fate that you and I have to die here today. It was really my fault that I didn't act sooner; otherwise, your entire family and all your apprentices wouldn't have lost their lives. I am so deeply disturbed."

"We are friends with unsurpassed devotion. There's really no need to explain…." another voice replied.

Hearing that voice, Yilin suddenly remembered. "That's Uncle-Master Liu Zhengfeng," She whispered at Linghu Chong's ear.

Neither of them had any idea about what had just happened inside Liu House, so both were stunned beyond words when they suddenly made out Liu Zhengfeng in the remote valley and hear his companion saying something like "you and I have to die here today" and "your entire family and all your apprentices have lost their lives."

"No one can escape the destiny of death," Liu Zhengfeng said. "Having met the soul-mate in his living, one would die with no regrets."

"Brother Liu, your flute play today seemed to have the implication of some

kind of regret. Are you regretting about how your son cravenly clung to life instead of brave out death in the face of danger, and brought humiliation to your reputation?" the other man asked.

"Big brother Qu, you guessed it right. I have really spoiled the child too much and didn't teach him well, shaping him into such a coward with no integrity." Liu Zhengfeng sighed deeply.

"With or without integrity, it's all the same," Qu Yang comforted him. "A hundred years later, we all will rot into dusts. What's the difference? When I was hiding on the rooftop, I should have acted sooner, but I figured you wouldn't want me to ruin your relationship with your friends in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance for my sake. I also thought about the vow I had with you that I would never hurt anyone in the Chivalrous Side. That's why I waited and waited. Who would have expected that the Songshan Sword School, the school housing the Alliance Chief, would act so viciously?"

Liu Zhengfeng did not answer and, for a long while, kept his silence. Eventually, with a deep sigh, he spoke again.

"How would any of these vulgar people ever understand the high spirits and graceful friendship of ours in music? Appraising with normal sense, they of course are convinced that our association would greatly harm the Five Mountains Sword Alliance and the Chivalrous Side. Alas, they don't understand, and we cannot really blame them. Big brother Qu, were you hit at your Da-Zhui Acupoint, which shook your heart arteries?"

"Yes," Qu Yang answered. "Songshan style inner energy is truly outstanding. When I took the hit on my back, I had no idea that the inner energy would be so strong to have passed through my body and broke your heart arteries with the shock, too. If I'd known earlier that you couldn't have escaped the hit, either, I wouldn't have shot out that cluster of 'Black Blood Sacred Needles.' Hurting more innocent people wouldn't have helped any bit. Luckily, those needles were not poisonous."

Hearing the name "Black Blood Sacred Needles," Linghu Chong felt his heart

skip a beat. “This man saved my life. Could he have been an elite fighter of the Demon Cult? If that’s true, why would Uncle-Master Liu befriend him?”

Liu Zhengfeng let out a slight smile. “But thanks to that, we got to play the zither and the flute together one last time. From now on, there will never be any zither and flute play like that.”

Qu Yang heaved a deep sigh. “Legend has it that before Ji Kang was executed, he played his zither one last time, and regretted that the ‘Guang-Ling Song’ music would be lost forever after his death. The ‘Guang-Ling Song’ sure is wonderful, but how can it compare to the ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer’ song we just played? However, Ji Kang probably felt just the same like how we feel today.”

“Big brother Qu, you were quite enlightened just minutes ago, how come you just turned rigid again?” Liu Zhengfeng smiled. “Our play of the ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer’ song, tonight, has brought out the best of the music. The music had already existed once in the world, and we have already played the song together once. What more could we ask for?”

“You are right!” Qu Yang clapped his hands gently. Then a short moment later, he sighed again.

“What’s the matter, big brother? Ah, I see. You are worrying about Feifei,” Liu Zhengfeng said.

“Feifei? Could that be the same Feifei?” Yilin thought to herself. Then, sure enough, she heard Qu Feiyan’s voice.

“Grandpa, after Grandpa Liu and you gradually recover from your injuries, we’ll wipe out every one of those Songshan villains and avenge granny Liu and the rest of them!”

Suddenly a long laugh rose from behind the rock wall. Amid the echoing of the loud laugh, a dark shadow had jumped out. Light of reflection flashed, and the next moment, a man appeared in front of Qu Yang and Liu Zhengfeng, holding a long sword in his hand. He was none other than the “Great Songyang Palm” Fei Bin of the Songshan Sword School.

“Hey, this little girl certainly likes to talk big. She wants to wipe out the entire Songshan Sword School. But I doubt everything will go as you had wished,” Fei Bin said with a cold sneer.

“Fei Bin, you have already killed my entire family, and I could die any minute now thanks to the palm strikes from your two apprentice brothers. What else do you want?” Liu Zhengfeng stood up.

“Didn’t this little girl say to wipe everyone out? I am here to wipe everyone out!” he said with an arrogant grin. “Little girl, why don’t you come here, and be the first one to die?”

“Feifei and her grandpa saved your life. You have to think of something to save them!” Yilin pleaded Linghu Chong in whisper.

Even before she had said anything, Linghu Chong had already thought hard about ways to help them, thus repay the favor to the grandpa and granddaughter. But firstly, the opponent was an elite fighter of the Songshan Sword School; even if he hadn’t incurred any injuries, he still would be no match for Fei Bin. Secondly, he had already found out that Qu Yang was a member of the Demon Cult. The Huashan Sword School had always considered the Demon Cult an evil enemy. How could he help an enemy? The conflicting thoughts wavered in his mind, and he simply could not decide what to do.

“Fei Bin, you are a well known master in a famous sword school. Since Qu Yang and I are in your hands now, you can kill us or torture us all you want. But what would you become if you bully a little girl? Feifei, go! Leave!” Liu Zhengfeng urged.

“I’d rather die together with Grandpa and Grandpa Liu. I won’t live alone,” Qu Feiyan exclaimed.

“Hurry up! Go now!” Liu Zhengfeng urged again. “This is a matter between adults. It has nothing to do with a child like you.”

“I won’t go!” Qu Feiyan insisted.

Drawing two short swords by her waist, she rushed forth to hide Liu

Zhengfeng behind her.

“Fei Bin, Grandpa Liu spared your life earlier, and now you are still requiting kindness with enmity. Aren’t you ashamed of yourself?” she shouted.

“You said you would wipe out our entire Songshan Sword School. Are you starting already? Do you expect me to just stand here and get slaughtered, or should I turn around and run away?” Fei Bin mocked in a chilling tone.

Liu Zhengfeng grabbed at Qu Feiyan’s arm. “Hurry up! Go now!” he said hastily. But because the shock from the Songshan style inner energy had broke his heart arteries, and the play of the “Smiling Proud Wanderer” had also used up his last bits of strength, the grab became so weak. With an easy pull, Qu Feiyan had freed her arm from Liu Zhengfeng’s hand.

Suddenly, reflections flashed in front of her eyes and Fei Bin’s long sword was already on its way toward Qu Feiyan’s face. She blocked the thrust with the left short sword and immediately thrust out the right short sword.

Fei Bin sneered as he circled his sword tip back and smacked it against Qu Feiyan’s sword in her right hand. A stream of numbness and pain shot through Qu Feiyan’s right palm and her entire right arm; the sword in her right hand flew out of her grip instantly. Fei Bin shook his sword in an angle and then poked backward. “Clank!” The sword in Qu Feiyan’s left hand was also knocked out and flew dozens of feet away. Before Qu Feiyan even had any chance to react, Fei Bin’s long sword was already pointed at her throat.

Fei Bin turned to Qu Yang, a cold grin on his face.

“Elder Qu, how about I first prick out your granddaughter’s left eye, then cut off her nose, and then cut off her two ears….”

Qu Feiyan screamed loudly. She jumped forward and threw herself at the long sword.

Fei Bin retracted the sword swiftly as he poke out with his right index finger, and Qu Feiyan fell to the ground like a rock.

Fei Bin burst into loud laughter. “You wicked demons,” he yelled, “with so

many crimes you have committed, I am not going to let you die this easy. Let me first prick out your left eye." He raised his sword and pierced it down toward Qu Feiyan's left eye.

"Hold it!" someone shouted from behind him suddenly. Astounded, Fei Bin quickly turned around and waved his sword about to block any possible attacks. He had no idea that Linghu Chong and Yilin were actually hidden behind the rocks even before he arrived; otherwise, with his outstanding Kung Fu skills, nobody could have sneaked behind him without him noticing it. Under the dim moonlight, he saw a young man standing still, his hands on his hips.

"Who are you?" Fei Bin asked in a yell.

"Linghu Chong of the Huashan Sword School here shows his respect to Uncle-Master Fei," Linghu Chong answered. He bowed to salute, but his body started shaking and he had a hard time keeping himself balance.

"Fine! So it's the senior apprentice of apprentice brother Yue." Fei Bin nodded. "What are you doing here?"

"I was injured by a Qingcheng apprentice, and was healing my wounds here, thus having the honor to meet you, Uncle-Master Fei."

"Hmm, it's perfect that you're here." Fei Bin snorted. "This little girl is an evil member of the Demon Cult. She deserves being executed. If I have to finish her off myself, it would look like a senior bullying a junior. You go ahead and kill her." He pointed at Qu Feiyan.

Linghu Chong shook his head. "This little girl's grandpa calls Uncle-Master Liu of the Hengshan Sword School a brother. So that would make her even one generation lower than I am. If I kill her, people would say that a Huashan Sword School senior bullied a junior. Once the news gets out, it probably wouldn't do much good for our reputation. Besides, this senior master Qu and Uncle-Master Liu are both badly wounded; to bully a junior of theirs right in front of them wouldn't be the right kind of behavior for a true gentleman. Our Huashan Sword School certainly wouldn't do anything like that. Uncle-Master Fei, will you please pardon me?"

He had clearly implied that if the Songshan Sword School did the thing the Huashan Sword School disdained to do, that would obviously make the Songshan Sword School far less graceful than the Huashan Sword School.

Fei Bin knitted his brows, and a ferocious look appeared in his eyes.

"So you are secretly collaborating with the Demon Cult, too!" he bellowed in a stern voice. "That's right, Liu Zhengfeng mentioned earlier that this Demon Qu had helped with your wounds and saved your life. I certainly did not expect an impressive Huashan apprentice to have submitted himself to the Demon Cult so quickly."

The sword in his hand started to vibrate, and cold reflections flashed from the blade. He was about to thrust his sword at Linghu Chong.

"Nephew Linghu, you have nothing to do with this. There's no need for you to mix yourself up in this. You should leave quickly to avoid getting your Master into an awkward position," Liu Zhengfeng urged.

Linghu Chong laughed. "Uncle-Master Liu, we all consider ourselves part of the Chivalrous Side and irreconcilable with the Evil Side. What does the word 'chivalrous' really mean? Is it considered chivalrous to bully someone who has severe injuries? Is it considered chivalrous to kill an innocent little girl? If we were capable to lower ourselves to commit such deeds, what makes us different from the Evil Side?"

"Even our Demon Cult doesn't do things like that," Qu Yang said with a sigh, "Little brother Linghu, why don't you leave now? If the Songshan Sword School likes to do such things, then just let them do as they wish."

"I am not leaving!" Linghu Chong refused, a broad grin emerging on his lips. "'Great Songyang Palm' Hero Fei enjoys a great reputation in the Martial World. He is one of the best Masters in the Songshan Sword School. I am sure he was just trying to scare the little girl with harsh words. How could he actually commit such shameless deeds? Uncle-Master Fei is not that kind of guy." He folded his arms in front of his chest and leaned onto the trunk of a pine tree.

A strong wish to kill washed over Fei Bin, and he grinned hideously.

“You think you can just tie me up with your words, so I have to let these three devils walk free? Keep on dreaming! Well, since you have submitted yourself to the Demon Cult, what difference does it make for me to kill four instead of three?” He took a step forward.

Seeing the hideous look on his face, Linghu Chong was astounded, yet he kept the same face as he pondered hard for an idea to get out of trouble.

“Uncle-Master Fei, you are thinking about killing me to rid the witness, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Hey, you’re smart. That’s right!” Fei Bin had no intention to deny. He took another step forward forcefully.

Suddenly, a young nun walked out from behind the rocks.

“Uncle-Master Fei, the sea of bitterness has no bounds; repent and the shore is at hand. You only have the intent to commit a crime, yet the crime has not been committed. It’s still not too late to rein in at the brink of the precipice.”

That was Yilin. Although Linghu Chong had instructed her to hide behind the rocks and not to let anyone see her, seeing the danger Linghu Chong was in, she immediately walked out without much thinking, hoping to convince Fei Bin to stop with her sincere advice.

Fei Bin was caught in great surprise. “You are from the Heng-Shan Sword School, right? Why are you hiding here in such a sneaky way?” he demanded.

“I…I….” Yilin blushed and could only murmur.

Qu Feiyan lay on the ground still. She could not move any of her limbs because of her sealed acupoints, but she could still talk.

“Sister Yilin,” she shouted, “I knew you’d be together with big brother Linghu. So you did heal his wounds. Too bad…too bad we are all going to die soon.”

“No, we won’t.” Yilin shook her head. “Uncle-Master Fei is a renowned hero in the Martial World. How could he hurt a severely wounded man or a little girl like you?”

“Is he really a renowned hero, a true man?” Qu Feiyan only sneered.

“The Songshan Sword School houses the Alliance Chief of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, the leader of the Chivalrous Side of the Martial World. They would, of course, follow the chivalrous rules first no matter what they do,” Yilin emphasized.

She had really said those words sincerely and honestly, but in Fei Bin’s ears, it all sounded like sarcastic ridicules. “In for a penny, in for a pound,” he thought secretly. “If I let anyone of them leave here alive, my reputation would be ruined forever. Even though I am killing demons of the Demon Cult, killing wounded people and prisoners is not the kind of act of a true man, and will surely be looked down upon by others.” At that thought, he pointed his sword at Yilin.

“You are neither severely wounded, nor a little girl that cannot move; I guess it’s alright to kill you then.”

Greatly stunned, Yilin took several steps back.

“Me…me…me? Why do you want to kill me?” in a trembling voice, she asked in disbelief.

“You ganged up with the demons of the Demon Cult. That little devil even called you a sister; you are obviously taking the demons’ side. Of course I won’t let you go.” He took another step forward and was ready to thrust his sword at Yilin.

Linghu Chong hurriedly rushed in front of Yilin, hiding her behind him. “Apprentice sister, run! Quick! Ask your Master to come save us,” he shouted loudly. He knew clearly that water a mile away wouldn’t extinguish the fire close by. Asking Yilin to go seek help was just another excuse to get her out of here, staying away from danger.

Fei Bin waved his sword and thrust the tip of the blade toward Linghu Chong’s right shoulder, which Linghu Chong dodged by turning to the side hurriedly, then, Fei Bin thrust out three more continuous moves, which Linghu Chong was only able to escape barely.

Yilin was extremely worried. She drew the broken sword by her waist in a hurry and thrust it at Fei Bin's shoulder.

"Big brother Linghu, you have injuries. Stay back!" she shouted.

"I see. The little nun has forgotten about all the prohibitions. After seeing a handsome lad, she doesn't even care about her own life any more." Fei Bin let out a stream of laughter. He slashed his sword straight down. "Clank!" The two swords collided and Yilin's broken sword was instantly knocked out of her grip. Fei Bin pushed his sword forward, and the sword headed straight toward Yilin's heart.

Fei Bin figured that he had as many as five people to kill. Even though none of them could really put up a decent fight with him, but a long delay would mean many hitches, and he couldn't afford to let any one of them escape, otherwise, there would be endless trouble. That was why he was so determined to use deadly moves.

Linghu Chong jumped on Fei Bin, poking two fingers of his left hand at Fei Bin's eyes. Fei Bin pushed the ground with his toes and leapt backward, slicing his sword conveniently following his body movements, which left a long cut on Linghu Chong's left arm.

Linghu Chong's fierce attack with disregard to his own life saved Yilin from being stabbed, but it also exhausted all his strength that he could hardly breathe, his body trembling hard, as if he could collapse any second.

Yilin rushed forward and held onto his arms. "He will have to kill the both of us!" she exclaimed in a sobbing voice.

"Run…run away now…hurry up…!" although totally out of breath, Linghu Chong managed to squeeze out these words.

"You dummy!" Qu Feiyan grinned. "Don't you understand what she wants? She wants to die with you…!" Before she could finish, Fei Bin's sword had already penetrated her heart.

Qu Yang, Liu Zhengfeng, Linghu Chong, and Yilin all screamed in disbelief.

With a hideous grin on his face, Fei Bin slowly took a step toward Linghu Chong and Yilin, then another step, then another. Blood dripped down from the tip of the sword one drop after another.

Linghu Chong's mind fell into a state of chaos: "He…he actually killed the little girl. How vicious! I am going to die, too. Why does apprentice sister Yilin want to die together with me? Yes, I've saved her before, but she has saved me, too, and has repaid the favor she owed me. I had never known her before. We are just apprentice brother and sister of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. There is of course the code of honor in the Martial World, but she doesn't have to sacrifice her life for that. I'd never thought an apprentice of the Heng-Shan Sword School would take brotherhood of the Martial World so seriously. Sister Dingyi must be a remarkable person. Ah, it's this apprentice sister Yilin who will die together with me, not my little apprentice sister Lingshan. Talking about Lingshan, what is she…doing right now?" With a gentle sigh and a slight smile, he shut his eyes tight and completely ignored the dreadful face of Fei Bin that was getting closer and closer.

All of a sudden, several faint sounds of a huqin came into his ears. The tone was filled with sadness, almost sounded like a sigh, yet also sounded like a sob. The sounds quivered, like drops of rain falling on leaves. Very surprised, Linghu Chong opened his eyes.

A shock went through Fei Bin's heart: "'Night Rain of Xiaoxiang' Great Mr. Mo is here."

The music played by the huqin became even more depressing, but Great Mr. Mo remained behind the trees.

"Great Mr. Mo, why don't you come out?" Fei Bin yelled.

Music from the huqin stopped. A thin figure walked out from behind a pine tree. Linghu Chong had long heard of the fame of "Night Rain of Xiaoxiang" Great Mr. Mo, but he had never seen him in person before. Now in the dim moonlight, he could see a man standing in front of Fei Bin. He was so thin that he was mere skeleton, and his back arced badly. He looked almost like someone

who was so ill that he could collapse down and die any second. Who would have thought that the well-known Head Master of the Hengshan Sword School had such a wretched appearance?

Great Mr. Mo cupped his hands toward Fei Bin, still holding the huqin in his left hand. “Apprentice brother Fei! How is Alliance Chief Zuo?” he greeted.

Seeing that Great Mr. Mo hadn’t come with any ill intentions, and also knowing that he didn’t get along with Liu Zhengfeng, Fei Bin answered, “Thanks for asking, Great Mr. Mo. My apprentice brother Zuo is just fine. Liu Zhengfeng of your respectful school collaborated with the Demon Cult and had plotted against our Five Mountains Sword Alliance. Great Mr. Mo, what do you think we should do?”

Great Mr. Mo took two steps toward Liu Zhengfeng and said in a chilling tone, “We should kill!” Right after the word “kill,” a thin and narrow long sword appeared in his hand out of nowhere. Cold reflections flashed when he thrust the sword hard backward; the tip of the blade went straight toward Fei Bin’s chest. His sudden attack was so fast and swift that it almost looked unreal. That was one of the unique moves of the “Magical Thirteen Phantom Stances of Hengshan Mist.”

Fei Bin had fallen for this unique style of Kung Fu from Liu Zhengfeng earlier in Liu House, and now he fell for it again. In great astonishment, he jumped back as quickly as he could, but it was still not quick enough. In a tearing sound, the sword sliced across his chest; his robe was cut open and a long cut appeared on his chest. Although the wound was nothing serious, because of his surprise and anger, he had lost his edge in spirit.

Fei Bin immediately started his own attack, but Great Mr. Mo had taken control of the initiative with his first move, and his attacks poured out continuously, one wave after another. The thin sword twisted and vibrated like a serpent, flying swiftly in between Fei Bin’s sword flashes. Fei Bin was forced to retreat back a step, then another, without a chance to utter a cry or swear.

Qu Yang, Liu Zhengfeng, and Linghu Chong were all taken aback by the

magical and ghost-like sword moves of Great Mr. Mo. Liu Zhengfeng had studied with him in the same school, and had been his apprentice brother for decades, but even he did not expect such outstanding and magnificent sword skills out of him.

Drops of blood splashed out between the two swords. Fei Bin jumped and dodged and ducked, trying his best to block away the attacks, but he still couldn't escape the cage of light created by Great Mr. Mo's fast sword. The splashing blood gradually made a red circle around them.

Suddenly, Fei Bin uttered a long scream and jumped high in the air as Great Mr. Mo took a few steps back. Shoving his sword into the huqin, Great Mr. Mo turned on his heels and strolled away. A song of "Night Rain of Xiaoxiang" rose from behind the pine trees, and soon the music fainted into the distance.

Fei Bin collapsed onto the ground after his jump. Blood sprang out from his chest and up into the air like a fountain. In the fierce fight, he had loaded the Songshan style inner energy. When his chest was stabbed, the inner energy was still circling inside his body, and started pumping blood out from the wound. Such a scene was strange yet horrifying.

Yilin held onto Linghu Chong's arm, her heart thumping like a drum. "You didn't get injured again, did you?" she asked in whisper.

Qu Yang heaved a sigh. "Brother Liu, you had mentioned before that you don't get along with your apprentice brother. Who would have thought that he would save us when we are in danger."

"My apprentice brother always behaves in such odd ways. I really have no idea beforehand what he might do. We don't get along. It has nothing to do with the fact that I'm rich and he's poor. It's just that our temperaments don't agree with each other," Liu Zhengfeng explained.

"His sword skills are so outstanding, but the music he played with his huqin only showed sadness and depression that will move the audience into tears. His music play is too vulgar; he still cannot get rid of the sordid street tone in his music." Qu Yang shook his head.

“Exactly!” Liu Zhengfeng couldn’t agree more. “Apprentice brother’s huqin play has no circulation in the chords, and the tone always goes far too deep into the sadness. Good poems have regards about joyful but not fancy, sad yet not depressing. What’s so different about music? Every time when I hear his huqin play, all I want to do is to run as far away as possible from it.”

Linghu Chong couldn’t help thinking to himself, “These two are simply obsessed with music. Even in such a life threatening situation, all they could think of are ‘sad yet not depressing’ and ‘vulgar versus graceful.’ If it weren’t Uncle-Master Mo who got here in time, we would all be dead. What a pity that the little girl Qu had to be murdered by Fei Bin.”

Liu Zhengfeng continued. “But regarding sword skills and Kung Fu skills, I am really far behind. In the old days, I haven’t really showed a lot of respect for him. Now when I think about it, I truly regret it myself.”

“The Head Master of the Hengshan Sword School really lives up to his reputation.” Qu Yang nodded in agreement. He turned to Linghu Chong. “Little brother, I have a favor to ask of you. Will you do me this favor?”

“Senior Master, please! Of course I will,” Linghu Chong answered.

Qu Yang cast a side-glance at Liu Zhengfeng and then said, “Brother Liu and I love music to the extreme. We spent several years writing this song called ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer.’ We believe this piece of music is so unique that during the past millennium, there was nothing even close to it. From now on, even if there will be someone like Qu Yang again, there might not be a Liu Zhengfeng; if there will be someone like Liu Zhengfeng, there might not be a Qu Yang. If there will be people like Qu Yang and Liu Zhengfeng, the two of them might not be born during the same period of time to meet and become friends. To find two who are good not only in music, but also in inner energy, yet have the same tastes and similar level of Kung Fu skills, to create a piece of music like this, is more difficult than finding a needle in a hay stack. If this piece of ultimate music gets buried into oblivion, brother Liu and I will undoubtedly sigh with regret in the underworld.” Taking a book of manuscripts out from his chest pocket, he continued, “This is the music score of the ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer’

song. Little brother, for the sake of the great devotion and efforts the two of us put in this, will you please find the right kind of people to give this to?"

"If the world gets to know the 'Smiling Proud Wanderer' song, then big brother Qu and I will be able to die content," Liu Zhengfeng added.

Linghu Chong bowed and took the music score manuscripts from Qu Yang with both of his hands, and put it into his own pocket.

"Please rest assured. I will definitely try my best," he promised.

When Qu Yang had said that he had a favor to ask of him earlier, Linghu Chong thought it was going to be something very difficult and dangerous. He also worried that to accomplish such a task might require action that would violate his school rules and offend fellow martial people in chivalrous schools. But he really could not refuse in the circumstance by then. Learning now that all they wanted was for him to find two guys to play zither and flute, he immediately felt much relaxed, and heaved a sigh of relief.

"Nephew Linghu, this piece of music not only is the ultimate lifelong work of the two of us, it is also related to a historical figure. A good amount of the melody in the 'Smiling Proud Wanderer' song was modified by big brother Qu Yang based on the Jin Dynasty musician Ji Kang's 'Guang-Ling Song'," Liu Zhengfeng elaborated.

Qu Yang was quite proud of himself for this one. "It has always been said that after Ji Kang had died, the 'Guang-Ling Song' was lost for ever. Do you have any idea where I got it?" he beamed at Linghu Chong.

"I don't have the slightest idea about music. And since you two do things so differently from other people, how would I have any clue about the answer?" Linghu Chong thought to himself. "Senior Master, will you please tell us?" he requested.

Qu Yang grinned. "Ji Kang was a very interesting guy. According to history books, he liked to 'speak with magnificent style, quoting from Lao and Zhuang[46] and enjoying the company of unusual people.' His character was the

type that I would have gotten along with. Zhong Hui was a high official at that time. Hearing about Ji Kang's great reputation, he went to visit Ji Kang, but Ji Kang just went on with his blacksmith work, and paid no attention to him. Put out by Ji Kang's indifference, Zhong Hui had to leave. Ji Kang asked him, 'what did you hear before you came, and what did you see before you leave?' Zhong Hui answered, 'I heard what I heard before I came, and I saw what I saw before I leave.' Zhong Hui the fellow was really a smart guy, but he was too narrow-minded. Because of this embarrassing encounter, he became angry and spoke ill of Ji Kang to Sima Zhao.[47] Sima Zhao then ordered Ji Kang to be killed. Before Ji Kang was executed, he played a song with zither. That was really a good display of elegance. But when he said that the 'Guang-Ling Song would be lost for ever from now on,' he really underestimated everybody after his generation. He wasn't the composer of this piece of music. He lived during the Western Jin Dynasty, even if it really became extinct after the Western Jin Dynasty, what about the dynasties before the Western Jin Dynasty?"

Linghu Chong was confused. "Before the Western Jin Dynasty?" he repeated in a mutter.

"Yep!" Qu Yang nodded. "I really didn't agree with that comment of his, so I started digging in the tombs of Emperors and high officials in Western Han Dynasty and Eastern Han Dynasty. After digging in twenty-nine different ancient tombs, I finally found the music score manuscripts in Cai Yi's tomb." He burst into loud laughter and was very content with himself.

Linghu Chong was dumbfounded: "Just for the manuscripts of a single piece of music, this Senior Master actually dug into twenty-nine different tombs."

Qu Yang's smile gradually disappeared, and a bit of depression climbed onto his face. "Little brother," he said, "I know you are the senior apprentice of a famous chivalrous school, and I really shouldn't be asking you for this favor, but in such urgency, I really have no other choice but to get you involved. Please pardon me." Then he turned to Liu Zhengfeng. "Brother, we can go now."

“Right!” Liu Zhengfeng answered and extended his hand out.

The two grabbed hold of each other’s hand and laughed loudly. Amid the loud laughter, both gathered the remaining inner energy still left in them and burst the main arteries in their bodies. Within seconds, both shut their eyes tightly and passed away.

“Senior Master! Uncle-Master Liu!” Linghu Chong shouted in shock and reached out to check the two’s breathing, but found none.

“They…they are all dead?” Yilin asked in shock, and Linghu Chong answered with a nod.

“Apprentice sister, let’s bury the four bodies quickly, in case someone comes over searching for them and causes more trouble. We must under no circumstances ever let out the news that Great Mr. Mo killed Fei Bin.” He lowered his voice and said, “If this ever gets leaked out, Great Mr. Mo would know for sure that it was us who leaked the news. That would create major problems.”

“Yes,” Yilin agreed. “But what if my Master asks about it? Should I tell?”

“You can’t tell any one. If you ever tell this to your Master and Great Mr. Mo comes to pick a sword fight with your Master, that would be disastrous,” Linghu Chong emphasized.

Remembering the outstanding and magical sword skills that Great Mr. Mo had demonstrated earlier, Yilin couldn’t help but shiver. “I won’t tell,” she promised hurriedly.

Linghu Chong slowly bent over to pick up Fei Bin’s long sword, and then started poking holes on Fei Bin’s dead body with it. Yilin didn’t have the heart to watch.

“Big brother Linghu, he is already dead, why do you still hate him so much and want to torture his dead body?” she asked hesitantly.

“Great Mr. Mo’s sword is very thin and narrow. It would take a master no time to figure out who had executed the kill by checking the wounds on Uncle-

Master Fei's dead body. I am not torturing his dead body; I am just messing up every wounds on his body, so no one would be able to tell," Linghu Chong explained.

Yilin gasped. "Why are there so many schemes in the Martial World? It's really…really difficult," she couldn't help thinking.

Seeing that Linghu Chong had thrown down the long sword and was picking up stones to throw on top of Fei Bin's body, she said hurriedly, "Don't work too hard. Why don't you sit down? Let me do it." Picking up a stone, she placed it on Fei Bin's body, so gently as if the body still had senses and could feel the pain because of the stones.

Yilin kept on picking up stones and soon covered the four bodies of Liu Zhengfeng and the others. Affectionately placing one more stone on Qu Feiyan's grave, she murmured.

"Little sister, if it weren't for me, you wouldn't have to suffer so much pain. I wish you would ascend into the Heaven to enjoy all the happy things, and then in your next life, get reborn as a male, performing many charitable and pious deeds, so eventually you would be able to enter the western paradise. May the merciful Buddha preserve us all…."

Linghu Chong sat on the ground leaning against a rock. Thinking about how Qu Feiyan had saved his life, yet had to die a terrible death at such a young age, he couldn't help but feel sad. Even though he never believed in Buddhism, he still recited some 'may the merciful Buddha preserve us all' together with Yilin.

After some good rest, the pain from Linghu Chong's wounds lightened, so he took the book of manuscripts of the "Smiling Proud Wanderer" music score out from his pocket and opened it up. The book was filled with strange symbols, and he didn't even know a single one of them. His reading capabilities were very limited. Having no idea that music scores all used this kind of strange symbols, he thought that these were difficult words and characters he had never learned before. So he put the music book back into his robe pocket. He raised his head slightly while taking a deep breath, thinking, "Uncle-Master Liu had

given up everything, including his own life, for his friend. Even though the friend was an Elder in the Demon Cult, both of them showed zealous passion and great courage, and deserved to be called true men. They are so admirable! I thought Uncle-Master Liu was going to have his 'Gold Basin Hand Washing' ceremony, and quit the Martial World today. What really happened? How did he become an enemy of the Songshan Sword School? How strange?"

Still lost in his wild imagination, Linghu Chong suddenly noticed some flashes of sword reflections from the northwest corner in the distance. The sword moves looked very familiar. It seemed that an elite fighter in his own sword school was in a sword fight with someone else. A shiver ran through his heart.

"Apprentice sister, wait here for a while. I will be right back," he muttered to Yilin,

Yilin was still working on piling the stones for the graves, and didn't even notice the sword flashes. She thought Linghu Chong was just in need of nature's call, so she nodded.

Using a fallen branch as his crutch, Linghu Chong stepped forward. Picking up Fei Bin's long sword on his way, he hung it by his waist, and then walked toward the direction of the sword flashes. After a short while, he could already vaguely hear the weapons colliding noises. The noises were so dense that they sounded nonstop; obviously it was a fierce fight.

"Which senior master in our school is in the fight?" he asked himself. "The fight has lasted for quite a while. Apparently the opponent is an elite fighter, too."

He bent his back and slowly sneaked closer. Hearing the colliding sounds get louder, he knew he was already very close to the scene, so he hid behind a big tree and peeked out. In the bright moonlight, he could make out a scholarly looking man standing in the middle of the open field, holding a long sword. It was his Master, Yue Buqun. A short Taoist priest circled around Yue Buqun in blazing speed and continuously thrust his sword toward him. In the time of one circle, he would have made over a dozen thrusts. This man was the Head Master

of the Qingcheng Sword School, Yu Canghai.

Seeing his Master in a fight with someone so unexpectedly, and the opponent being the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School, Linghu Chong felt very excited. He could tell that his Master fought in a very relaxed and graceful way. Every time when Yu Canghai thrust his sword out, Yue Buqun would simply block it leisurely. When Yu Canghai circled behind his back, he didn't turn around, but only waved his sword to protect his back. Yu Canghai's sword attacks became faster and faster, yet Yue Buqun only defended and didn't attack back.

Linghu Chong watched on with great admiration. "Master's nickname is 'Gentleman Sword,' and he really is behaving like a polite, graceful, and elegant gentleman. Even when he is in a fight with someone, he didn't show any trace of violent brutality, none whatsoever." He watched some more and then thought, "Master is able to control his temper well because he has not only poise, but also outstanding Kung Fu skills."

Yue Buqun rarely got into fights with anyone. In normal days when Linghu Chong watched him fight, it would always be a demonstration fight with Master-Wife for the apprentices. Those were all fake fights. But this time it was a real one, so of course it was quite different from all the demonstration fights.

Linghu Chong could hear the whistles made by Yu Canghai's sword every time he thrust the sword out, clearly showing the great strength behind each sword attack. "I've always looked down upon the Qingcheng Sword School. But this short Taoist priest actually is a very tough opponent! Even if I were healthy, I still wouldn't last one minute fighting against him. The next time I meet him again, I'd better watch out for myself. The best thing to do would be keeping a safe distance from him." Linghu Chong told himself inwardly as he went on watching.

By then, Yu Canghai had accelerated his circling around Yue Buqun. It almost looked as if a purple shadow had surrounded Yue Buqun and was rotating around him. The noises of swords colliding into each other had become so dense that all the sounds echoed continuously, and making a long ringing sound.

Linghu Chong couldn't help but think, "If those dozens of attacks were aimed at me, I probably won't be able to block a single one, and would end up enjoying dozens of holes in my body. This short Taoist priest probably has even better Kung Fu than Tian Boguang."

Seeing that his Master still was not attacking back, he became worried. "That short Taoist Priest's sword skills are so stunning, I hope Master won't lose to him because of any small oversight."

Suddenly a loud "ring" echoed in the air, and Yu Canghai had slid back like a shooting arrow. He stopped at about a dozen feet away and stood there still; Linghu Chong didn't even catch a glimpse of him shoving his sword back to his sheath. Greatly astonished, Linghu Chong immediately glanced at his Master. Yue Buqun had also put his sword back into the sheath and just stood there quietly. The change happened in such an abrupt manner that Linghu Chong had no idea who had won and who had lost the fight. He wasn't even sure if anyone had been injured internally or not.

For a moment, the two just stood there quietly, then eventually Yu Canghai sneered coldly, "Very well! I am sure we will meet again!" After these words, he sprinted toward his right side without any further delay.

"Master Yu, wait!" Yue Buqun yelled loudly. "What about the Lin Couple?" He quickly chased after Yu Canghai following the same direction. Before their voices fainted down, the two had vanished from sight.

From the dialogue between the two, Linghu Chong could tell that his Master had won the fight with Yu Canghai. He couldn't help but feel great joy. But because of all his wounds and all the excitement, fatigue soon started to sink in, and he felt totally exhausted.

"Ah, Master has gone after Yu Canghai. With the level of Qing-Gong they have, they are probably a mile away by now!" he thought.

He leaned on his crutch and started walking back to meet Yilin again when suddenly a long scream floated out from within the woods to his left. The scream sounded miserable. Astounded, Linghu Chong took several steps toward

the woods. A yellow wall could vaguely be seen behind the trees, and it looked like the kind of wall of a temple. Fearing that his fellow apprentices of the Huashan Sword School might be injured in fights with the Qingcheng apprentices, he strode in the direction of the yellow wall. When he was only about dozens of feet away from the temple, he heard an old and shrill voice speaking from inside the temple.

"Where is the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript'? If you tell me where it is with no tricks, then I promise to wipe out the entire Qingcheng Sword School for you, and avenge the couple of you two."

Linghu Chong had heard this voice before. That was when he was on the bed in "Jade House." So he recognized the man easily. It was "Hunchback of the North" Mu Gaofeng.

"Master is looking for the whereabouts of the Lin Couple right this moment. Turned out the two actually are in the hands of Mu Gaofeng!" he thought to himself.

"I don't know if there is actually an 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript'," a man's voice replied. "The sword art of our Lin family had always been passed down orally throughout the generations. I've never seen a sword art manuscript."

"This one must be apprentice brother Lin's father, the Chief Escort of the Fortune Prestige Escort House – Lin Zhennan," Linghu Chong told himself.

Then the voice continued, "Senior Master, I thank you for considering seeking revenge for us. Yu Canghai of the Qingcheng Sword School had committed so many evil crimes; he will definitely have a terrible death. Even if he could escape you, Senior Master, he would die under someone else's blade for sure."

"Are you saying that you are determined to keep this to yourself? I am sure you've heard about the reputation of the 'Hunchback of the North' before, haven't you?" Mu Gaofeng screeched with a threatening tone.

"Of course everyone knows about your great reputation, Senior Master Mu," Lin Zhennan answered.

“Excellent! Excellent!” Mu Gaofeng said. “I wouldn’t call it a great reputation, but you probably have heard about how cruel and merciless I can be, haven’t you?”

“I knew you would be torturing me, Senior Master Mu. Even if we really had the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ I would have never given that out no matter how others combine threats with inducements. Ever since I was taken prisoner by the Qingcheng Sword School, I’ve been tortured every single day. I don’t have high Kung Fu skills, but I do have some hard bones,” Lin Zhennan said firmly.

“Well, well, very well!” Mu Gaofeng pondered upon himself.

Outside the temple, Linghu Chong thought to himself, “Why is he saying ‘well, very well?’ Oh, I see. That’s why!” Then he heard Mu Gaofeng’s voice again.

“You claim that you have hard bones and can take tortures. The short bull-nose of the Qingcheng Sword School tortured you left and right, and you still didn’t let the words out. If your Lin family never had the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ then you would simply have no words to let out, and wouldn’t have to rely on your hard bones. I see. You do have the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ You just won’t give it out no matter what.”

After a short while, he heaved a sigh. “You are really dumb, you know that?” he muttered. “Chief Master Lin, why won’t you give the sword art manuscript up? The sword art manuscript won’t do you any good. You know what I think? I think the sword arts recorded on that sword art manuscript must be really ordinary. Otherwise why you cannot even beat a couple of Qingcheng apprentices? This type of sword art skills is really not worth mentioning, you know what I am saying?”

“That’s right! Senior Master Mu, you said it right! Even if I really had this ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ such ordinary good-for-nothing sword art wouldn’t even enable one to protect his own life, why in the world would you, Senior Master Mu, be interested in it?” Lin Zhennan said.

“I am only curious,” Mu Gaofeng said. “Since that short bull-nose made such a fuss about it and dragged in so many people to pressure you, there’s got be something strange here. Maybe the sword art recorded in that sword manuscript is really high-level stuff; it’s just that you are too stupid to understand it, and had to bring disgrace to the ancestors of your Lin Family. Why don’t you take it out and let me, a senior master, have a look at it, and point out all the advantages and good tricks of your Lin family’s ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’, so everyone in the Martial World will know about them? Wouldn’t that be better for your Lin family’s reputation, too?”

“Thanks for your kind regard, Senior Master Mu,” Lin Zhennan answered. “Why don’t you search me and see if I really have the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?”

“Nah, no need for that!” Mu Gaofeng declined. “You’ve been the Qingcheng Sword School’s prisoner for many days. They must have frisked you up and down dozens of times. Chief Master Lin, you are really dumb. Did you know that?”

“I am really dumb. I’ve got that part figured out a long time ago. I don’t need others to point that out for me,” Lin Zhennan responded.

“Well, you don’t understand, but maybe Mrs. Lin will. Who knows? Mothers tend to love their kids more than fathers,” Mu Gaofeng said.

“What are you talking about? What has it got anything to do with my Pingzhi? What happened to him? Where…where is he?” Mrs. Lin shrieked.

“The lad Lin Pingzhi is quite bright. I liked him the first moment when I laid my eyes on him. That kid surely knows how to behave himself. He knows that my Kung Fu skills are tough, so he had submitted himself to be my apprentice,” Mu Gaofeng said.

“So my son had asked you to be his Master, Senior Master Mu? That’s really his good fortune. Because of injuries from the cruel tortures, the two of us could die any moment now. Will you please call our son over to see us one last time?” Lin Zhennan asked.

“It is only natural that you want your son to attend upon dying parents. That’s easy.” Mu Gaofeng smirked.

“Where is Pingzhi? Senior Master Mu, I beg of you! Please ask our son to come. I’ll never forget your kindness,” Mrs. Lin pleaded.

“Very well! I’ll go get him right away. But Mu Gaofeng never likes to be ordered around by others. To get your son here is as easy as falling off a log, but you’ll have to first tell me the whereabouts of the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ truthfully.”

“If you don’t believe me, there’s really nothing I can do to convince you. The two of us are already on the verge of dying; all we want is to have one last look at our son. If there were really an ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ I would have asked you to tell my son without your asking about it.” Lin Zhennan sighed.

“That’s exactly why I think you are dumb,” Mu Gaofeng explained. “Your heart arteries are already busted. I don’t even have to touch you with a little finger; you’d be dead, anyway. You simply won’t last another hour, why are you so stubborn and simply refuse to tell me where the sword art manuscript is? Obviously, it’s because you want to reserve the Lin family Kung Fu that was passed down from your ancestors. But after you are dead, Lin Pingzhi would be all there is left in the Lin family. If he’s dead too, then there’s this sword manuscript, but there won’t be any Lin family’s descendents left to practice it; what good would that do your Lin family to leave the sword manuscript in this world?”

“Is my son…my son alright?” Mrs. Lin asked in terror.

“Right now, of course he is alright. Once you tell me where the sword art manuscript is, and after I get it, I promise I will give it to your son. And when he has questions when he studies it, I can also give him some good pointers, so he won’t be like his dad, Master Chief Lin, who studied the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’ for his entire life and still had no clue about how to use it whatsoever. Wouldn’t that be a better choice than smashing him dead with a

knife hand chop?" Smashing sounds rose from inside the temple. Apparently he had just smashed some big object into pieces.

"Why…why do you want to smash him dead?" Mrs. Lin asked fearfully.

Mu Gaofeng burst into loud laughter. "Lin Pingzhi is my apprentice. If I want him alive, he will stay alive. If I want him dead, he will die. Anytime I feel like smashing him dead, all I need to do is to raise my hand." Some more smashing sounds came. He had smashed some more things.

"Wife, enough talks. He doesn't have our son, otherwise, why wouldn't he bring him here and threaten to kill him right in front of our eyes?" Lin Zhennan said.

Mu Gaofeng laughed out loud. He said, "I said you were dumb, and you really, really are dumb. If the 'Hunchback of the North' wants to kill your son, is it that hard? Let's assume that he is not in my hands right now, but if I am really determined to find him and whack him, you really think it's going to be that difficult for me? I have friends and information sources all over the Martial World. To find your darling baby son is like a piece of cake."

"Husband, if he really decides to give our son trouble…." Mrs. Lin said to Lin Zhennan in a low voice.

"Yeah! Once you tell me, even if the both of you cannot survive, you still have Lin Pingzhi to carry on with your name. Wouldn't that be nice?" Mu Gaofeng encouraged.

Lin Zhennan laughed. "Wife, if we tell him where the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' is, the first thing he'll do is get the sword art manuscript; the second thing on the list will be to kill our son. If we don't tell him, in order to get the sword art manuscript, the hunchback would have no other choice but to protect Pingzhi's life. As long as Pingzhi doesn't tell him, the hunchback would never dare to harm him. You must understand the trick here."

"You are right!" Mrs. Lin said in agreement. "Hunchback, go ahead and kill us," she yelled at Mu Gaofeng.

By then, Linghu Chong knew that Mu Gaofeng must be infuriated. If he couldn't figure out a way to draw Mu Gaofeng away, then the Lin couple would be dead in no time for sure. So he said loudly, "Senior Master Mu, following my Master's order, Huashan Sword School apprentice Linghu Chong here invites Senior Master Mu to come out. We have something important to discuss with you."

In great rage, Mu Gaofeng had raised his hand, ready to strike down on Lin Zhennan's head, when he suddenly heard the words from Linghu Chong outside of the temple. He was dumfounded. It was rare for him to ever give ways to others, but the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, Yue Buqun, surely made him think twice, especially after his dreadful encounter with the "Divine Art of Violet Twilight" of Yue Buqun outside of the "Jade House" the other day. Probably Yue Buqun and his apprentices had been eavesdropping outside the temple for quite a while when he threatened the Lin couple. That type of deeds was really looked down upon by all the chivalrous schools.

"Yue Buqun asked me out to discuss something? He will probably pretend to make peace between the Lin couple and I, while actually casting sarcastic remarks. A wise man will never put himself in a disadvantageous situation. I'd better take off now," he told himself.

"Sorry," he said after making up his mind, "I really don't have any time. I already have previous arrangements. Please tell your Master that whenever he gets some free time, he is welcome to visit me near the northern border. I will be humbly awaiting for him!"

He jumped out of the hall into the courtyard. Pressing hard on the ground with his left foot, he had jumped up the roof and then down to the back of the temple. Afraid to be stopped and questioned by Yue Buqun, he disappeared in an instant.

Hearing that Mu Gaofeng had fled, Linghu Chong was so glad. "Wow, this hunchback is really scared of my Master. If he hadn't run away and decided to fight me, I wouldn't stand a chance."

With the help of the branch, he slowly walked into the tiny temple housing the village god. The hall was enveloped in darkness. There was no lights or candles. He could only make out two shadows of a man and a woman sitting on the floor leaning against each other.

"I am Linghu Chong of the Huashan Sword School. Apprentice brother Pingzhi has also joined our sword school just recently. I am here to pay my respect to Uncle Lin and Auntie Lin," he said with a bow.

Lin Zhennan burst with joy. "Young sir, you are really flattering us. We are both injured severely, so please pardon us for greeting back. Is our son really an apprentice of the Huashan Sword School's Hero Yue now?" His voice trembled in the last couple of words.

Yue Buqun had a much bigger fame in the Martial World than Yu Canghai. Every year, Lin Zhennan had been sending presents to the Qingcheng Sword School to fawn on Yu Canghai, but he dared not to send any present to the Huashan Sword School, knowing that he would be in no position to make friends with one of the Head Masters of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. Now seeing that even such a ferocious Mu Gaofeng fled as soon as he heard the name of the Huashan Sword School mentioned, and his son so fortunate to have become an apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, he found himself in high spirits and his heart filled with joy.

"Yes," Linghu Chong answered. "The hunchback Mu Gaofeng was forcing your son to become his apprentice, but your son simply wouldn't agree. The hunchback got mad and was about to harm your son when my Master happened to be passing by. So Master was able to save him. Your son begged Master sincerely to take him in as an apprentice. Seeing his sincerity and that he would make a good apprentice, Master did not object. Earlier Master just had a sword fight with Yu Canghai and defeated him in the fight. Yu Canghai ran away, and Master chased after him in order to get the whereabouts of you two, Uncle and Auntie. But he didn't know that you two are actually right here."

"I wish…wish Pingzhi could get here soon. We don't have much time left." Lin Zhennan murmured. He breathed hard, but it still seemed that more air was

breathed out than in; he was really on the threshold of meeting death.

"Uncle Lin, don't talk. After my Master takes care of the business with Yu Canghai, he'll come back looking for you. The respectful Master must have a way to heal you," Linghu Chong comforted him.

Lin Zhennan let out a wry smile and then closed his eyes. After a few moments, he spoke again in a low voice, "Little brother Linghu, I…I…I am not going to make it. I am overjoyed to know that Pingzhi was taken into the Huashan Sword School. Will you…you please help take care…care of him?"

"Uncle, please don't worry. Apprentice brother Lin will be studying together with us, and we will be like brothers in a family. I will put in extra effort to take good care of him," Linghu Chong assured him.

"Thanks to your great kindness, we will be remembering it even after we head to the underworld," Mrs. Lin cut in.

"Please, don't talk much. Concentrate on your breathing and you will feel better," Linghu Chong suggested.

Lin Zhennan appeared to be short of breath. Disjointedly, he said, "Will you… will you please tell my son? The thing in the basement of the old Lin House in the Xiang-Yang Alley of Fuzhou has…has been handed down in the family from generation to generation. He must…he must take good care of it. But…but his great grandfather Sir Yuantu had said in his last words: 'for all my descendents, you shall never read it, or great misfortune will fall upon you.' Please tell…tell him to remember that well."

Linghu Chong nodded. "All right! I will take the message to him," he promised.

Lin Zhennan murmured, "Many…many…many…." The word "thanks" never made it out of his mouth before he fell dead.

Wishing to see his son one last time and tell him these important words himself, Lin Zhennan had been struggling to hold out. Now after Linghu Chong gave his word that he would take the message, and knowing his son had found

such a good home, in great joy, he had no regrets left. As soon as he gave up on the struggle, he departed with the living world.

"Young hero Linghu," Mrs. Lin said, "I hope you will tell my son never to forget seeking revenge for his parents." She threw herself toward the stone steps under the columns of the temple and bumped her head hard onto one of the steps. With her previous fatal injuries, the bump killed her instantly.

Linghu Chong heaved a deep sigh, and couldn't help thinking to himself, "Yu Canghai and Mu Gaofeng both tried to force the whereabouts of the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' out from Lin Zhennan, but he would rather die than speak out the secret. Only when he knew he was going to die right away, he had no choice but to ask me to take a message. But he still feared that I would go take out the sword art manuscript of his Lin family, so he said something like 'you shall never read it, or great misfortune will fall upon you.' Humph, what kind of person did you think Linghu Chong was? Did you actually think I would covet the sword art manuscript of your Lin family? You were really worrying yourself for nothing…?"

By then he was totally exhausted, so he sat down leaning against a column and rested with his eyes shut.

A good while passed when Yue Buqun's voice finally rose outside the temple, "Let's check out this temple."

"Master, Master!" Linghu Chong shouted out loud.

"Is that Chong?" Yue Buqun asked in delight.

"Yes, it's me!" Linghu Chong answered. He propped himself up slowly against the column.

It was already near dawn, so when Yue Buqun entered the temple, he easily spotted the bodies of the Lin Couple. "Are they Chief Master Lin and his wife?" he asked with a frown.

"Yes." Linghu Chong answered and then went ahead and told everything: how Mu Gaofeng had compelled the Lin couple, and how he scared Mu Gaofeng off

but the Lin couple still died because of the injuries. He also told his Master the last words of Lin Zhennan.

"Ah, Yu Canghai had really committed some terrible sins this time, yet he got nothing," Yue Buqun muttered to himself.

"Master, did that dwarf Yu asked you for mercy?" Linghu Chong asked in an excited tone.

"Master Yu has very fast legs. I chased him for quite some time, yet was only getting further and further behind him. The Qing-Gong of the Qingcheng Sword School is, I guess, somewhat better than ours of the Huashan Sword School," Yue Buqun replied.

"The Qingcheng Sword School's 'bum bum back fleeing' Kung Fu is definitely better than other schools." Linghu Chong burst into laughter.

Yue Buqun pulled a long face and reproached, "Chong, you've really gotten a glib tongue with no decency. How would you be a role model for all your apprentice brothers and sisters if you keep acting like this?"

Linghu Chong turned his head aside, stuck his tongue out and made a face. "Yes, Master!" he answered

"If you agree, then agree. Why did you stick your tongue out when you answered? You are not being honest," Yue Buqun criticized.

"Yes, Master!" Linghu Chong replied.

Yue Buqun had brought him up since he was little. To him, Yue Buqun was almost like a father figure. Although he revered the Master, he never reserved himself much in front of the Master.

"Master, how did you know that I stuck my tongue out?" he asked with a grin.

Yu Buqun snorted. "The muscles under your ear were retracting, so of course you were sticking your tongue out. You always like to run wild. See, you've come to a good grief this time! Are your wounds better now?"

"Yes, they are much better now," Linghu Chong answered. He then added,

“Well, the more grief this time, the smarter next time!”

Yue Buqun scolded, “Don’t you think you are too smart already?”

He took a signal flare out from his pocket and walked into the courtyard. Lighting the fuse with a match, he threw the flare up into the air. The flare rocketed high into the sky, and with a loud “Bang,” it exploded in the air, leaving a trail of silver light in the shape of a long sword, hanging in the sky for a long while. Then the sword shaped light trail descended slowly for a couple hundred feet before finally bursting into hundreds of glitters. That was the type of signal flare used by the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School to call on all school members.

Soon footsteps from a distance rose as someone ran toward the tiny temple.

“Master, are you here?” Gao Gengming’s voice shouted from outside.

“Yes, I am in the temple,” Yue Buqun answered.

Gao Gengming came into the temple and bowed to Yue Buqun. “Master!” Seeing that Linghu Chong was standing next to the Master, he said cheerfully, “Big apprentice brother! Are you alright? We became really worried when we heard that you were severely wounded.”

“I guess I am plain lucky this time. I am still alive,” Linghu Chong said with a smile.

More sounds of footsteps came from the distance. It was Lao Denuo and Lu Dayou this time. As soon as Lu Dayou saw Linghu Chong, spending no time greeting the Master, he rushed straight forth toward Linghu Chong and gave a big hug to him while shouting happy words wildly. Then third apprentice Liang Fa and fourth apprentice Shi Daizi came into the temple one after another. After a few moments, seventh apprentice Tao Jun, eighth apprentice Ying Luobai, Yue Buqun’s daughter Yue Lingshan, and the new apprentice Lin Pingzhi came all at once.

Seeing his parents’ bodies, Lin Pingzhi threw himself onto them and began crying bitterly. All the fellow apprentices felt real sorry for him.

Yue Lingshan was gleefully surprised when she saw that Linghu Chong was all right. But seeing Lin Pingzhi's bitter grief, she knew it wouldn't be appropriate to express her cheerfulness out loud at this moment, so she walked by Linghu Chong and slightly pinched his right hand.

"Are…are you all right?" she whispered.

"I am fine!" Linghu Chong answered.

For the last couple of days, Yue Lingshan had been worried to death about her big apprentice brother, and now when she finally bumped into him all of a sudden, she could no longer control the excitement that had been growing inside her these days. She grabbed onto Linghu Chong's sleeve and burst out crying.

Linghu Chong gently padded her on the shoulder. "Little apprentice sister, why? Did someone pick on you? I'll go whoop his ass for you!" he whispered.

Yue Lingshan did not answer and went on weeping. After shedding some more tears, she finally felt better. Wiping off the tears with Linghu Chong's sleeve, she murmured, "You are not dead. You are not dead!"

"I am not!" Linghu Chong shook his head.

"I heard that you took a palm strike from that Yu Canghai of the Qingcheng Sword School," Yue Lingshan whispered. "That man's 'Heart Crushing Palm' can kill without spilling blood. I've seen him kill many people with my own eyes. I was so scared that…that…." Remembering all the agonizing suffering and torturing she had to go through in the last couple of days, she could not help but start weeping again.

"I was really lucky that his palm strike missed me narrowly. It was such a cool scene earlier when the Master was fighting Yu Canghai and scared him so much that he ran away so fast. Too bad you missed that one," Linghu Chong said with a smile.

"Let's not mention this to any outsiders," Yue Buqun ordered. Linghu Chong and the rest of the apprentices all complied in unison.

Yue Lingshan stared at Linghu Chong through her tearful eyes. Linghu Chong

looked so wan and sallow. There was little color in his cheeks. Feeling very pitiful for him, she sniveled, “Big apprentice brother, this time…this time you are so badly wounded. You should have some good rest and recovery once we get back to Mount Huashan.”

Seeing that Lin Pingzhi was still sobbing bitterly by his parents’ bodies, Yue Buqun said, “Pingzhi, cry no more. We should make arrangements for the funeral now.”

“Yes, Master!” Lin Pingzhi stood up and answered. But seeing blood all over his mother’s face and forehead, he could not help but shed more tears. “When Mom and Dad passed away, they couldn’t even see me one last time. They must…they must have wanted to give me some last words of advice,” he murmured, sobbing.

“Apprentice brother Lin,” Linghu Chong said, “I was here when your parents passed away. The two of them wanted me to take care of you. That’s something I should be doing anyway, there’s not much to talk about that. Your father had some other words that he wanted me to pass on to you.”

“Big apprentice brother, at the time…when my mom and dad passed away, fortunately they had you as accompany. Otherwise, they would have had no one around them when they left this world. I…I am truly grateful!” Lin Pingzhi bowed.

“The rascals of the Qingcheng Sword School tortured your parents cruelly in order to force the whereabouts of the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ out of them, but they never gave in. The torturing busted their heart arteries. Later that Mu Gaofeng also tried to force information out. Mu Gaofeng is a mean villain; doing what he did was not something out of his character. But Yu Canghai, as the Master of a big school, had acted in such a despicable way. Everybody will hold him in contempt for sure,” Linghu Chong said.

“If I cannot seek my revenge, I will be no better than a pig!” Lin Pingzhi vowed with his teeth gnashed. He punched hard on the column. Although his Kung Fu skills were ordinary, yet because of the great hatred, the punch carried

much strength and even the dirt atop the cross beam in the temple started to fall down.

"Junior brother Lin," Yue Lingshan said, "this matter really started because of me. When you settle your score later, as your senior apprentice sister, I definitely won't just stand by with folded arms."

"Many thanks, senior apprentice sister!" Lin Pingzhi bowed.

"The tenet of our Huashan Sword School has always been 'if others don't offend us, we won't offend them'." Yue Buqun sighed. "Other than our deadly enemy the Demon Cult, there's no grudge between any of the schools or clans in the Martial World and us. But starting from now on, the Qingcheng Sword School…the Qingcheng Sword School…Well, as a part of the Martial World, not offending anyone is so much easier said than done."

"Little apprentice sister and junior brother Lin," Lau Denuo said, "this misfortune wasn't really caused by junior brother Lin, because he killed the wicked son of Yu Canghai to defend justice. It was really because Yu Canghai coveted the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' of the Lin family. Many years ago, when the Head Master of Qingcheng, Evergreen, lost to junior brother Lin's great grandfather's 'Evil-Resisting Sword Art,' the root of the trouble was already planted."

"That's right," Yue Buqun said. "Most martial people tend to scramble for supremacy and victory. So as soon as they hear about some kind of secret manuscripts of Kung Fu, not even bothering to check if it's real or not, they would all try to secure it by force or by trickery, by hook or by crook. People like Master Yu or Hunchback of the North, who already have elite skills and fames, really have no need to covet the sword art manuscript of your Lin family."

"Master, my family really do not have any kind of Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript," Lin Pingzhi said. "My dad taught me the seventy-two moves of the Evil-Resisting Sword Art personally and orally. He told me to memorize everything in my head. If there was some kind of sword art manuscript, of

course my dad wouldn't tell outsiders anything about it, but why would he keep it a secret from me? There's no reason for that."

Yue Buqun nodded in agreement. "I never believed that there was some kind of Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript. Otherwise, Yu Canghai would be no match for your father. It's just so clear and simple."

"Junior brother Lin, your father wanted me to tell you: In the Xiang-Yang Alley of Fuzhou…," Linghu Chong said.

Yue Buqun waved him off. "These are the last words of Pingzhi's father. You can tell Pingzhi alone. There's no need for others to hear about it."

"Yes, Master!" Linghu Chong answered.

"Denuo, Gengming, you two go buy two coffins in the town of Hengshan." Yue Buqun instructed.

After putting the Lin couple into the coffins, they hired some porters to carry the coffins to the river wharf. The group hired a big ship and headed north by water.

When they arrived at west Henan Province, they changed into traveling by land. Linghu Chong rested in a wagon through the trip, while his wounds slowly recovered. Days later, they arrived afoot the Jade Maiden Peak of Mount Huashan. The Lin couple's coffins were temporarily placed in a small temple by the side of the peak, so an appropriate date for burial can be decided on later. Gao Gengming and Lu Dayou went up the peak ahead of everyone else to inform about the return of the group. Soon the rest of the Huashan apprentices that stayed on Mount Huashan, about twenty of them or so, came down to greet the Master. Lao Denuo introduced them to Lin Pingzhi one by one. Some elder ones were well over thirty years of age; some younger ones were only about fifteen or sixteen. Among them were six female apprentices. As soon as they spotted Yue Lingshan, they immediately went into chitchats. The rule of the Huashan Sword School's apprenticeship was that seniority would be based on the date order when each one became an apprentice, so with even the youngest one Shu Qi, Lin Pingzhi had to call him senior apprentice brother. Yue Lingshan

was the only exception. She was the daughter of Yue Buqun, so she couldn't be ranked using the same ordering system, and had to be called based on age. People older than her called her junior sister. She was really a couple of years younger than Lin Pingzhi, but she firmly insisted on being Lin Pingzhi's senior apprentice sister. Since Yue Buqun did not object, so Lin Pingzhi called her "senior apprentice sister."

After they all climbed up the peak, Lin Pingzhi followed behind all the senior apprentice brothers. The mountain was very precipitous, yet appeared to be graceful and elegant because of the many ancient trees. Bird tweeting and stream gurgling echoed, making the place a lively environment. Several big houses stood on the side of the hill, some tall, some short, built following the slope of the hill, and all with whitewashed walls.

A middle-aged, pretty lady slowly walked toward them, and as soon as Yue Lingshan caught the sight of her, she dashed into her arms and shouted excitedly.

"Mom, I've got a new junior apprentice brother!" She pointed at Lin Pingzhi, smiling.

Lin Pingzhi had heard from his senior apprentice brothers that Madam Yue, Ning Zhongze, or Master-Wife, as how all the apprentices called her, was really a junior apprentice sister of the Master under the same master, and her sword skills were really no less than the Master. So he rushed forward and kowtowed.

"Lin Pingzhi here shows his respect to Master-Wife."

"That's wonderful! Get up, get up!" Madam Yue said with a bright smile. She turned to Yue Buqun with a grin. "Every time when you go down the mountain, you always seek a couple treasures to satisfy your craving. This time when you headed for the Hengshan Meeting, I figured that you'd be getting at least three or four new apprentices. How come you only came back with one?"

"Didn't you always say quality is more important than quantity? What do you think about this one?" Yue Buqun grinned.

"This one is way too handsome. He doesn't look like the kind of material for

Kung Fu training. Why don't you have him study the Four Books and the Five Classics[48] from you, so he will pass the Xiucai[49] test someday, and maybe become a Zhuangyuan[50] later?" Madam Yue said with a big smile.

Lin Pingzhi blushed. "Master-Wife is not taking me seriously because I look gentle and frail. I'll have to work extra hard, so I won't be looked down upon because my performance is inferior to the other senior apprentice brothers," he told himself.

"That's a wonderful idea. If the Huashan Sword School could actually produce a Zhuangyuan, then we would be creating legends for our descendents," Yue Buqun answered with a grin.

Madam Yue glared at Linghu Chong. "You got into fights with others and got wounded again, didn't you? How come you don't look too well right now? Were you severely wounded?" she asked.

"It's already much better now. If I hadn't been lucky this time, I probably wouldn't even make it back to see you again," Linghu Chong replied with a light smile.

Madam Yue gave him another glare. "It's a good lesson for you to learn that there's always stronger than the strong. Did you think you lost in a fair fight?"

"I couldn't fend off the fellow Tian Boguang's fast knife chops. Master-Wife, will you please give me some pointers?" Linghu Chong requested.

Hearing that it was Tian Boguang who had injured Linghu Chong, Madam Yue nodded, while a big smile blossomed on her face. "So you were fighting the villain Tian Boguang. That's great! I thought you stirred up dispute and got into trouble again. How were his fast knife chops? Let's think it over and refine your techniques, so you can fight him again."

During the trip back home, Linghu Chong had asked several times for advice from his Master about techniques to counter Tian Boguang's fast knife chops, but Yue Buqun had not said any word in regard, and simply told him to ask his Master-Wife once they were back to Mount Huashan. Sure enough, as soon as

Madam Yue heard about it, she got so excited that she almost wished she could get onto it the very moment.

The bunch went into the house Yue Buqun lived in – "House of Integrity," and talked about events that had happened since the two groups separated. The six female apprentices really envied Yue Lingshan when they heard about her adventure in the town of Fuzhou and in the town of Hengshan. Lu Dayou, on the other hand, really bragged about how the big apprentice brother had fought the fierce fights with Tian Boguang and how he had slain Luo Renjie, to the bunch of junior apprentice brothers. He added many inflammatory details to the story, and it sounded as if big apprentice brother had defeated Tian Boguang instead of suffering a crushing defeat. After they had some snacks and tea, Madam Yue asked Linghu Chong to emulate Tian Boguang's knife moves and also inquired about how he had countered them.

"That chap Tian Boguang's knife skills are excellent. I was simply dazzled just looking at the chops, having a hard time fending them off. How could I have countered them?" Linghu Chong answered with a grin.

"If you couldn't fend them off, then you must have used all kinds of tricks in a slick way to cheat your way through," Madam Yue concluded. She had raised Linghu Chong up, so of course, she had a very good idea of Linghu Chong's character.

Linghu Chong blushed. "When I fought Tian Boguang outside the cave, the apprentice sister of the Heng-Shan Sword School had left, and I no longer had any scruple, so I fought the chap Tian Boguang with all my heart. But not far into the fight, he started using his fast knife chop moves. After fending off only two of those moves, I was already groaning inwardly: 'Looks like I am dead meat!' So I started laughing loudly.

"Tian Boguang pulled his knife back. 'What's so funny?' he asked. 'Do you think you can fend off my thirteen stances of 'Wind Storm' knife chops?'

"I said, 'Aha, so the well-known Tian Boguang is actually an expelled apprentice of our Huashan Sword School. I had no idea! Really no idea! I got it.

You must have been kicked out of our school because of your dreadful personal character.'

"Tian Boguang said, 'Expelled Huashan apprentice? What kind of nonsense is that? My Kung Fu is of its own style. What the hell has it got anything to do with your Huashan Sword School?'

"I said, 'This set of knife moves has a total of thirteen stances, right? 'Wind Storm?' Did you just pick a nice random name for it? I've seen my Master and Master-Wife use those during practices before. My Master-Wife created those out of a sudden inspiration when she was embroidering. You must know that we've gotten a Jade Maiden Peak in Mount Huashan, don't you?'

"Tian Boguang answered, 'Yeah. Everybody knows there's a Jade Maiden Peak in Mount Huashan. What about it?'

"I answered, 'This set of sword art created by my Master-Wife is called 'The Thirteen Stances of Jade Maiden's Golden Needle.' One of them is called 'Threading the Needle;' another one is called 'Seamless Heavenly Robe;' there's also another one called 'Late Night Embroidering of the Loving Birds.'

"Then I started counting with my fingers as I spoke. I said, 'That's right, the two moves you just used were evolved from the eighth move created by my Master-Wife: 'Weaving Goddess Throwing the Shuttles.' Why would a valiantly and hefty fellow like you imitate the manners of my affectedly sweet Master-Wife and throw the shuttle with the pretty hands from left to right, then right to left, like how the gorgeous looking Weaving Goddess would have when she is sitting by a weaving loom. Don't you think that's just hilarious…?'" Before he even finished, Yue Lingshan and the bunch of female apprentices all started giggling.

"That's too mischievous!" Yue Buqun scolded, yet could not help but grin.

"Bah," Madam Yue spat at Linghu Chong. "Why couldn't you use some other materials for your nonsense, and had to get your Master-Wife involved? You really deserve a good beating."

"Master-Wife, you don't understand." Linghu Chong grinned. "That Tian

Boguang is rather conceited. When he heard that I was comparing him to a woman and that my Master-Wife created her own magical knife moves, he had to argue about it and definitely wouldn't just kill me right away. Sure enough, he started to show me the moves of that set of knife chops one by one slowly. Each time when he was demonstrating one, he would ask, 'Did your Master-Wife create this one?'

"I pretended to be very secretive about it and kept my silence while secretly memorizing his knife moves. I waited till he was done demonstrating all thirteen stances and then said, 'This set of knife art of yours only has very slight deviations from the one created by my Master-Wife, but the majority of it is still the same. This is really odd? How did you steal it from our Huashan Sword School?'

"Tian Boguang said angrily, 'You couldn't fend off this set of knife art of mine. That's why you simply made things up to stall time so you can investigate the moves of my knife art. Did you think I am stupid? You said your school has the same set of knife art, then please show them to me and help me broaden my horizon.'

"I said, 'First of all, our school uses swords, not knives. Secondly, this set of 'Jade Maiden's Golden Needle Sword' of my Master-Wife is only taught to female apprentices, not male apprentices. If we hefty guys had to use such sissy looking sword art, wouldn't we become the laughing stocks of the entire Martial World?'

"Tian Boguang became even more angry. He yelled, 'Whether I become the laughing stock or not, I am going to make you admit that the Huashan Sword School does not have this set of Kung Fu. Brother, I admire your courage, but you shouldn't wag your tongue so freely and make fun of me.'"

"Who cares if such a shameless villain admires you or not? He deserves to be made fun of," Yue Lingshan interrupted.

"But in that circumstance," Linghu Chong said, "if I did not demonstrate this made-up set of 'Jade Maiden's Golden Needle Sword' in front of him, I'd be

dead by now. So with no other choices, I had to add some affectedly bashful moves at random based on his knife art and demonstrated the moves."

"Did these affectedly bashful moves of yours look real?" Yue Lingshan giggled.

"I've seen you use your sword many times, so how could they not look real?" Linghu Chong grinned.

"Ah, you are making fun of me saying that I use my sword in an affectedly bashful way. I am not going to talk to you for three days!"

Madam Yue had been quiet for the time being, and finally she spoke out.

"Lingshan, give your sword to big apprentice brother."

Yue Lingshan drew her long sword and handed it to Linghu Chong with the handle first.

"Mom wants to see the wicked look of yours with those affectedly bashful moves," she said with a grin.

"Chong, don't pay attention to Lingshan. How did you demonstrate the moves at that time?" Madam Yue asked.

Linghu Chong knew that Master-Wife meant to see Tian Boguang's knife moves. He took the long sword and then bowed to the Master and Master-Wife.

"Master! Master-Wife! May I demonstrate Tian Boguang's knife moves now?"

Yue Buqun nodded.

"Junior brother Lin," Lu Dayou said to Lin Pingzhi, "this is a rule of our school. Every time before an apprentice performs moves in front of elders, he must first ask for permission."

"I see. Thanks for telling me, sixth apprentice brother," Lin Pingzhi said.

Linghu Chong yawned languidly with a slight smile on his face and then held up his arms sluggishly as if he was going to stretch himself, but suddenly, he snapped his right wrist speedily and chopped three chops continuously. The chops were almost as fast as flashes, and whistles from the sword slashes

echoed. All the apprentices were shocked, and a few of the female apprentices uttered a cry of surprise almost in unison. Linghu Chong started to chop, slice, slash and stab the long sword in all directions. The moves appeared as if they were going in all directions randomly and disorderly, but in Yue Buqun and Madam Yue's eyes, the dozens of moves were clear and distinct; every hack, thrust, slash or chop was vicious yet accurate. Only moments later, Linghu Chong had pulled the sword back and stood still to bow to the Master and Master-Wife.

Yue Lingshan was a bit disappointed. "That fast?" she said.

"It has to be that fast." Madam Yue nodded. "Within those thirteen stances of fast knife chops, each stance has three or four moves of variation. Over forty moves had passed within such a short period of time. This is really an exceptional set of fast knife art."

"When the chap Tian Boguang used it, he was way faster than what I've just demonstrated," Linghu Chong added.

Madam Yue and Yu Buqun looked at each other, both couldn't help but feeling some admiration and surprise inwardly.

"Big apprentice brother, how come you didn't look anything close to affectedly bashful?" Yue Lingshan asked mockingly.

"For the last several weeks, I've been thinking about this set of fast knife chops all the time, so of course when I showed them I was able to do it a little bit faster. That day when I was showing them to Tian Boguang in the remote mountain area, I wasn't doing it as fast. I had to intentionally make those moves similar to his moves yet different, as well as putting on an act with many postures of a lady, therefore it was even slower," Linghu Chong explained with a smile.

"How did you put on the postures of a lady? Show me! Show me!" Yue Lingshan requested, her face split into a big grin.

Madam Yue turned to her side and drew a long sword from one of her female apprentices. "Use the fast knife chops!" She demanded.

“Yes,” Linghu Chong answered, and with a loud “Swoosh,” his long sword circled around Madam Yue’s body and the blade chopped toward her lower back.

“Mom, look out!” Yue Lingshan cried out in shock.

Madam Yue threw herself forward, completely ignoring Linghu Chong’s chop from her back, and her sword tip went straight toward Linghu Chong’s chest, also extremely fast and swift.

“Big apprentice brother, watch out!” Yue Lingshan uttered another cry.

Linghu Chong didn’t block either. “Master-Wife, he was way faster,” he said as he chopped backward with his sword.

Madam Yue attacked with another three thrusts, and Linghu Chong also returned the attacks with three chops. The two both fought with fast attacking moves, and none used any defending moves to block. Within a short moment, the two had exchanged over twenty moves.

Lin Pingzhi was dumbstruck. “Big apprentice brother speaks and acts like a lunatic, but his Kung Fu skills are excellent. I’ll have to train really hard, with no slack anytime whatsoever, so others won’t belittle me,” he told himself.

Right at the moment, with a quick thrust, Madam Yue’s sword tip had touched Linghu Chong’s throat. Not able to dodge that, Linghu Chong muttered, “He can block that.”

“Fine!” Madam Yue shouted. She waved her sword and a couple of moves later, her sword tip stopped next to Linghu Chong’s heart.

“He can block that,” Linghu Chong muttered the second time.

What he meant was that even though he wasn’t able to block it, Tian Boguang would have been able to block those two moves because his knife chops were a lot faster.

The two fought faster and faster, and soon, Linghu Chong didn’t even have any time to spill the words ‘he can block that.’ Whenever Madam Yue’s sword tip pointed next to his vital body parts, he simply shook his head to signal that

the move would not have worked on Tian Boguang.

Madam Yue was really in the mood now; she was totally carried away. Suddenly with a loud and clear roar, she thrust the sword rapidly around Linghu Chong's body, the sword tip flashed about as if it was everywhere; the silver reflection circled around and blurred the audiences' eyes. Suddenly she pushed the sword straight toward Linghu Chong's heart in the speed of light, with the strength of a thunder.

Linghu Chong was dumbfounded. "Master-Wife!" he cried.

By then the sword tip had already penetrated his robe. Madam Yue's right hand still pushed forward until the hand guard of the long sword touched Linghu Chong's chest. It seemed as though the sword had went through Linghu Chong's body all the way till the end of the sword.

"Mom!" Yue Lingshan screamed. Then sounds of clatter and jingle echoed when pieces of inch-long steel fell down to the floor by Linghu Chong's feet. Madam Yue smiled as she pulled her hand back. In her hand, all there was left of the long sword was only the sword handle.

"Junior apprentice sister, your inner energy has really progressed, and you kept it well from me," Yue Buqun said happily.

The two of them had studied under the same Master. They were used to the way they had called each other in their youth, so after they got married, they still called each other apprentice sister and brother.

"Senior apprentice brother is really flattering me. These were just insignificant skills. Nothing to be mentioned about!" Madam Yue said with a smile.

Staring at the pieces of broken sword, Linghu Chong gasped with astonishment. Master-Wife must have thrust the sword out with her whole might, otherwise, without the full strength of her inner energy, the sword thrust would not have had such extraordinary speed. As soon as the sword tip reached the skin, she immediately retracted the vigorous inner energy and changed the direction of the strength from horizontal to vertical, and the great shock from the inner energy strength broke the long sword into inch-long pieces. The superb

inner energy manipulation had really reached the level of perfection. In great admiration, he said, "Even if Tian Boguang's knife chops were faster, he still would not have escaped this thrust of yours, Master-Wife."

Lin Pingzhi stared at the many holes all over Linghu Chong's robe, which all came from Madam Yue's sword thrusts, and almost couldn't believe his own eyes. "There are actually sword arts this fantastic in the world. All I need is a portion of that and I'd have enough skills to avenge my parents." He then thought, "The Qingcheng Sword School and Mu Gaofeng both coveted our family's 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,' but when comparing our family's Evil-Resisting Sword Art to the sword art of Master-Wife, they are as far apart as from heaven to earth!"

Madam Yue was quite contended. "Chong, since you say this move can kill Tian Boguang, if you train hard, I'll teach it to you," she said.

"Thanks to Master-Wife!" Linghu Chong replied.

"Mom, I want to learn it too," Yue Lingshan demanded.

"Your inner energy is not there yet. You won't be able to learn this move." Madam Yue shook her head.

Very discontented, Yue Lingshan pouted her lips. "Big apprentice brother's inner energy is not that much better than mine. Why can he learn it, but not me?" she complained.

Madam Yue did not answer and only smiled.

Yue Lingshan grabbed onto her father's sleeve and begged, "Father, you teach me a Kung Fu that will counter that sword move, in case big apprentice brother picks on me after he learns that sword move."

"This sword move of your mom's is called 'Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning.' Since it's unrivaled, how could I have anything to counter it?" Yue Buqun shook his head and grinned.

"That's nonsense. It's alright that you flatter me, but once the name spreads out, fellow martial people will laugh their teeth off for sure." Madam Yue

smiled.

This sword move was really created out of a sudden inspiration of Madam Yue. It contained the Huashan inner energy style, the Huashan sword techniques, plus some of her clever inventions, so it was indeed a devastating move. But since it had just been created, there was no name for it. Yue Buqun had thought of naming it "The Unrivalled Thrust of Madam Yue," but then he thought that his wife had always been valuing her own pride; even after they got married, she still liked when fellow martial people called her "Heroine Ning" instead of "Madam Yue." Calling her "Heroine Ning" would be praising her own skills and behavior, and calling her "Madam Yue" would only make it sound like she was relying on her world-renowned husband.

Although Madam Yue called her husband's words nonsense, she truly liked the name "Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning," and praised inwardly that her husband, as a scholar, had really thought of a wonderful name for her new move.

"Father, when are you going to create the 'Incomparable and Unparalleled, The Ten Thrusts of Yue,' and then teach them to your daughter, so I can challenge big apprentice brother?" Yue Lingshan asked.

"No, I cannot. Dad is not as smart as your mom. I don't know how to create new moves!" Yue Buqun shook his head.

"It's not that you don't know. It's just that you are afraid of your wife, and dared not to create any," Yue Lingshan whispered at her father's ear.

Yue Buqun burst into loud laughter. "Total nonsense," he denied as he gave a gentle pinch to Yue Lingshan's cheek.

"Lingshan, don't get wild with your father. Denuo, go arrange the ritual so your apprentice brother Lin can pay his respects to the spirits of all the former grandmasters of our sword school," Madam Yue instructed.

"Yes!" Lau Denuo answered and soon had everything ready.

Yue Buqun led the group into the Back Hall. Lin Pingzhi could see a banner

board hanging high in the middle of the room, and the words "Inner Energy Drives the Sword" were inscribed onto the board. The hall was decorated in a very serious and solemn manner. Swords after swords hung by the two sidewalls. The sheaths were pitch black and the tassels all appeared to be ancient. Lin Pingzhi figured that those swords must have been the swords of all those former grandmasters of the Huashan Sword School. He thought to himself, "Huashan Sword School has such a great fame and reputation in the Martial World today. There must be heaps of evil villains who died from these grandmasters' long swords."

Yue Buqun knelt in front of the incense burner table and kowtowed four times.

"Apprentice Yue Buqun is taking Lin Pingzhi of Fuzhou as my apprentice today. All the ancestors' spirits in Heaven, will you please bless Lin Pingzhi and watch out for him, have him study and train hard, preserve his purity, follow the school rules, and never harm the reputation of the Huashan Sword School?" he prayed.

Hearing these words from Yue Buqun, Lin Pingzhi knelt down behind him respectfully.

Yue Buqun stood up. "Lin Pingzhi," he said coldly, "you are taken into our Huashan Sword School today. You must follow the school rules strictly. If you ever violate any of them, you will be punished based on the severity. If the violation were severe, you would be beheaded with no pardon. Our sword school has been in the Martial World for hundreds of years. Although we are capable of striving for supremacy with other schools using our Kung Fu skills, temporary victories are really not worth mentioning. The real important thing is that members of our school all greatly value the reputation of our school. You must remember that well."

"Yes, Master. I will always keep your advice and instruction in my heart," Lin Pingzhi promised.

"Linghu Chong, recite the school rules to Lin Pingzhi," Yue Buqun ordered.

“Yes, Master!” Linghu Chong answered. “Apprentice brother Lin, listen carefully. Firstly, any deceiving behavior to the Master and any disrespectful behavior to the seniors is prohibited; secondly, bullying the weak and hurting the innocent is prohibited; thirdly, assailing of women with obscenities is prohibited; fourthly, jealousy and killing between school members are prohibited; fifthly, stealing and forsaking righteousness for the lust of gain is prohibited; sixthly, conceited and arrogant attitudes when dealing with fellow martial people are prohibited; seventhly, reckless collaboration with gangsters or evil and wicked is prohibited. These are the seven prohibitions of Huashan. All members of the Huashan Sword School have to follow them.”

“Yes. I promise to remember the seven Huashan prohibitions that big apprentice brother just informed me. I will follow all the rules and never dare to violate any of them,” Lin Pingzhi promised sincerely.

“Well, that’s it.” Yue Buqun smiled. “Our school is not like most other schools that have many rules and regulations. As long as you remember these seven prohibitions well and always remember to uphold humanity and righteousness above everything else, behaving like a true gentleman, you’ll keep the Master and the Master-Wife happy.”

“Yes, Master!” Lin Pingzhi answered. He kowtowed to the Master and the Master-Wife, then bowed to and saluted all apprentice brothers and sisters.

“Pingzhi, let’s first bury your parents to let you fulfill your duty as the son, then I will start teaching you the basic drills of our sword school,” Yue Buqun said.

Tears instantly filled Lin Pingzhi’s eyes. “Many thanks to Master and Master-Wife,” He said, kneeling down on the floor.

Yu Buqun propped him up. “In our school,” he said kindly, “everybody is like a member of a big family. When one has a matter to deal with, it becomes a matter for the entire group. You don’t have to be so courteous.”

Yue Buqun turned around and looked at Linghu Chong up and down. After quite a while he finally said, “Chong, this time after you left Mount Huashan,

how many prohibitions have you violated?”

Linghu Chong’s heart skipped a beat. He knew that in normal days the Master was always kind and loving to all the apprentices, but if anyone violated school rules, he would be punishing the violator severely without any mercy. So he knelt down in front of the incense burner table.

“I have realized my mistake,” he said. “I did not listen to the advice from Master and Master-Wife. I violated the sixth prohibition of being conceited and arrogant when dealing with fellow martial people. I killed Luo Renjie of the Qingcheng Sword School on top of the Huiyan Wine House in the town of Hengshan.”

Yue Buqun let out a snort with a stern face.

“Father, it was Luo Renjie who had bullied big apprentice brother. At that time big apprentice brother just had a fierce fight with Tian Boguang and was severely injured. Luo Renjie took advantage of big apprentice brother. How could big apprentice brother just let himself get killed like that?” Yue Lingshan argued.

“This matter does not concern you. This really started because Chong kicked the two Qingcheng apprentices earlier. If it weren’t because of the grudge before, why would that Luo Renjie take advantage of Chong when everything is perfectly alright?” Yue Buqun reproved.

“When big apprentice kicked the Qingcheng apprentices, you had already given him thirty sticks of beating as punishment. That matter was over; you cannot count that one in again. Big apprentice brother is so badly injured, he can’t take any more beating now.” Yue Lingshan pleaded.

Yue Buqun gave a strict glare at his daughter. “We are talking about school prohibitions right now. You are an apprentice of the Huashan Sword School. Shut up and don’t interrupt me,” he yelled sharply.

Yue Lingshan rarely received any harsh words or stern looks from her father; feeling the grievance, her eyes reddened and she almost fell into a cry.

During normal days, even if Yue Buqun ignored his daughter, Madam Yue would have comforted her with kind words, but since Yue Buqun was judging school matters as the Head Master at the moment, it wouldn't be appropriate for Madam Yue to help her daughter, so she had to pretend that she didn't see or hear anything.

Yue Buqun continued with Linghu Chong, "When Luo Renjie took advantage of you and humiliated you, you would rather die than submit. That was something a true man would have done. But why did you offend the Heng-Shan Sword School in your words and said something like 'Once seeing a nun, one loses all bets,' and that even I was afraid of seeing nuns?"

Yue Lingshan burst into laughter. "Father!" she yelled.

Yue Buqun waved her off, but had dropped his stern look.

Linghu Chong explained, "I only wanted to get the apprentice sister of the Heng-Shan Sword School to leave at that time. I knew I was no match for Tian Boguang in a fight, and would have no way to rescue the apprentice sister of the Heng-Shan Sword School, but she valued the brotherhood of fellow martial people and didn't want to leave first, so I had to make up some nonsense. That kind of nonsense is truly disrespectful to the Uncle-Masters of the Heng-Shan Sword School."

"You wanted to get nephew apprentice Yilin to leave; the intention was good, but why can't you say something else instead of such harmful words? It was all because you are used to being frivolous in normal days. By now, everybody in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance has heard about this incident. Others must be saying behind our backs that you are not a true gentleman, and blame me for not disciplining you properly," Yue Buqun reproached.

"Yes, Master. I was wrong," Linghu Chong admitted.

Yue Buqun continued. "When you were recovering in the 'Jade House,' we understand that you had no other options. But when you hid nephew apprentice Yilin and that little demon girl of the Demon Cult under the quilt, and claimed that it was a prostitute in the town of Hengshan, weren't you risking too much?

If they had actually found out about the truth, losing face and hurting the reputation of our Huashan Sword School would be secondary; wouldn't you do a disservice to the entire Heng-Shan Sword School by ruining their hundreds of years of reputation?"

Cold sweat broke out on Linghu Chong's back. "Later when I thought more about it, I was also breathless with anxiety. So Master, you have already known about it," he said with a trembling voice.

"I only heard about how Qu Yang of Demon Cult sent you to the 'Jade House' to recover later," Yue Buqun said, "but when you told those two girls to hide under the quilt, I was already outside of the window."

"Fortunately, Master, you know that I am not a reckless loafer," Linghu Chong said.

"If you had actually been sleeping with the prostitutes, I'd have chopped off the head on your neck a long time ago. How could I still let you live 'til now?" Yue Buqun said in a chilling tone.

"Yes, Master!" Linghu Chong answered.

Yue Buqun's face turned more and more serious. After quite a while he spoke again. "You already knew that the Qu-named girl was a member of the Demon Cult, why didn't you kill her with a single sword blow? Although her grandfather had saved your life, it was obviously an evil plot the Demon Cult had put together using favor as bait to foment discord among our Five Mountains Sword Alliance. You are not stupid. You had to have figured that part out. There was actually a bigger conspiracy, and saving your life was only a small part of it. Even Liu Zhengfeng, such a smart and experienced senior master, fell into their trap, and ended up ruining his reputation and getting his entire family killed. You have seen such vicious and evil acts of the Demon Cult with your own eyes. But on our way from Hunan back to Mount Huashan, I didn't hear a single word of condemnation to the Demon Cult out from your mouth. Chong, I think after he saved your life, you are getting really confused about the distinction between good and evil, honesty and treachery. This matter

is the key matter that will affect the rest of your entire life. There's no middle ground for you to muddle with."

Linghu Chong couldn't help but remember the night in the remote valley when he listened to the zither and flute music played by Qu Yang and Liu Zhengfeng. It didn't seem like that Qu Yang had any evil thoughts and intentionally harmed Liu Zhengfeng at all.

Seeing the hesitation on Linghu Chong's face, obviously suspicious about his words, Yue Buqun said, "Chong, this matter is related to the future of our Huashan Sword School. It is also related to your future success or failure of your entire life. You cannot hide anything from me. Let me ask you: when you meet a member of the Demon Cult later, are you going to be treating evil as your enemy and slay evil with no hesitation?"

Linghu Chong stared at his Master blankly; a thought kept flashing around in his mind: "Later when I meet with a member of the Demon Cult, should I simply draw my sword and kill him without checking if it's right or wrong?" He really couldn't decide for himself, so he didn't know how to answer the Master's question.

Yue Buqun stared at Linghu Chong for a long while but still did not get an answer out from him. He heaved a deep sigh.

"It would be useless to force an answer out of you. When you left Mount Huashan this time, you greatly damaged the reputation of our sword school. I hereby punish you to meditate facing the wall for an entire year, so you can think the matter through thoroughly."

"Yes, Master! I accept my punishment." Linghu Chong bowed down.

"Meditating facing a wall for an entire year? Then throughout the year, how many total hours does he have to meditate?" Yue Lingshan asked.

"What total hours? Everyday from morning to night, other than eating and sleeping, he will be meditating to go over his mistakes."

"That's terrible! Wouldn't he be bored to death? Will he even be allowed to go

to bathroom?" Yue Lingshan said in worry.

"Watch your manners, young lady!" Madam Yue reproved.

"What's the big deal about meditating for a year?" Yue Buqun said. "Years ago when your grandmaster made some mistakes, he was punished to meditate facing a wall for three years and six months. During that entire period of time, he did not take one single step down the Jade Maiden Peak."

Yue Lingshan stuck her tongue out in disbelief. "So meditating for an entire year is actually a light punishment? Big apprentice brother said the 'Once seeing a nun, one loses all bets' completely out of good intentions. He wasn't really saying bad words!"

"Just because he had good intentions, I am only punishing him with one year of meditation. If he had any ill intentions, I'd have knocked off all his teeth and cut off his tongue," Yue Buqun said.

"Lingshan, stop bothering your father," Madam Yue said. "When your big apprentice brother starts meditating on top of the Jade Maiden Peak, you'd better not go up there to chat with him, otherwise, the good intention of your father would be ruined by you for sure."

"Big apprentice brother is going to be a prisoner on top of the Jade Maiden Peak, and you still call that a good intention? If you don't allow me to chat with him, then when big apprentice brother gets lonely, who's going to cheer him up? And within the entire year, who's going to practice sword arts with me?" Yue Lingshan whined.

"If you go chatting with him, then how will he be able to meditate and how can he think his mistakes through? All the many apprentice brothers and sisters can practice sword arts with you," Madam Yue said.

Yue Lingshan leaned her head to the side and thought for a while. "Then what's big apprentice brother going to eat? If he doesn't come down the peak for an entire year, isn't he going to be starved to death?" she asked.

"You don't have to worry. We will have people bringing food up the

mountain for him," Madam Yue answered.

Chapter 8: Meditation

Translated by Lanny Lin



Out of desperation, Linghu Chong grabbed at her left sleeve. “Let it go!” yelled Yue Lingshan angrily. She pulled hard, and with a loud tearing sound, the whole sleeve was torn off and her entire arm was exposed.

At dusk that night, after bowing to Master and Master-Wife and bidding his farewell to all the apprentice brothers and sisters, Linghu Chong climbed up the steep cliff on the very top of the Jade Maiden Peak, bringing only a long sword with him. There was a cave on top of the cliff. It was the spot used for punishing generations of Huashan Sword School apprentices who had violated school rules. The cliff was completely bare, with neither a single blade of grass,

nor any trees. Other than the cave, there was nothing else on the cliff. Mount Huashan has many beautiful locations of scenery and resourceful of trees and grasses, but this steep cliff was an exception. Legend told that the cliff was a pearl studded on the Jade Maiden's hairpin. The reason why earlier generations of Huashan grandmasters picked this steep cliff as the place for punishing apprentices was mainly because it was such a bare place that even birds or insects didn't want to live here. Therefore, when the punished apprentice meditated and thought through his mistakes, he wouldn't be distracted by other things and would be able to stay focused.

Linghu Chong entered the cave, and a big smooth rock on the floor soon caught his eyes.

"For the last several hundred years, many grandmasters of our Huashan Sword School must have sat on this rock before, which really smoothed out the rock surface. I, Linghu Chong, am the number one troublemaker of Huashan Sword School nowadays, so of course I am destined to sit on this rock. Master has been really kind to me. He had waited until today to send me here to sit on this rock," Linghu Chong thought to himself.

"Hello rock!" He patted on the big rock gently and muttered. "You've probably been lonely for many years. But Linghu Chong is here to be your company now."

Sitting down on the rock, he found his eyes only one foot away from the rock wall. Then something caught his attention. The words "Feng Qingyang" were carved on the left side of the rock wall. Those must have been carved using a sharp blade – the vigorous strokes were almost half-an-inch deep into the rock.

"Who's this Feng Qingyang?" Linghu Chong couldn't help but ask himself. "He is probably a senior master of our school who was once punished to meditate here. Oh, I see. My Grandmaster's name has a 'Qing' in it and he belongs to the 'Qing' generation of Huashan masters. This senior master named Feng must be my Grand Uncle-Master then. It takes great strength to carve something like that. His Kung Fu must have been outstanding. How come Master and Master-Wife never mentioned him before? I guess this senior master

must have passed away a long time ago."

He closed his eyes and worked on his breathing exercises for about an hour before standing up again to stretch out. Going back into the cave and sat back down on the rock, he started pondering upon the question, "When I meet people from the Demon Cult, should I simply draw my sword and kill him right away with no questions asked and with no regards? Doesn't the Demon Cult even have a single good person? But if he were a good person, why would he join the Demon Cult in the first place? Even if he had joined the Demon Cult by mistake, he could have quit immediately. If he didn't quit, then he must be willing to collaborate with evil and harm innocent people."

Instantly, many scenes appeared in his mind. Those were all scenes Master, Master-Wife, and other senior masters in the Martial World had told him before, things about the many kinds of murders the Demon Cult members had committed: The entire family of Master Yu in Jiangxi Province, a total of twenty-three, were taken prisoner by the Demon Cult and all were nailed onto tree trunks. Even the three-year-old child was no exception. Two of Master Yu's sons groaned for three days and three nights before finally passing away. When the Head Master of Dragon-Phoenix Saber in Jinan, Zhao Dengkui, held the wedding ceremony for his son, members of the Demon Cult forced their way into the crowds, beheaded the newly weds and placed their heads on top of the gift table claiming them to be wedding gifts. When old Hero Hao in Hanyang had his seventieth birthday party and invited many friends in the Martial World over, no one had known that the Demon Cult had planted bombs right underneath the room for the ceremony. The sudden explosion killed and wounded countless number of people, including Uncle-Master Ji from the Taishan Sword School, who lost an arm in this tragedy. Uncle-Master Ji had told this story himself, so it had to be true. Then he remembered when he met Uncle-Master Sun of the Songshan Sword School, whose both arms, feet and eyes were cut out. He was screaming nonstop, "The Demon Cult did this. Seek revenge for me! The Demon Cult did this. Seek revenge for me!" At that time the Songshan Sword School had already sent people to help, but with such severe wounds, there was really not much to be done. Remembering the image

of two empty holes on Uncle-Master Sun's face with blood gushing out continuously, Linghu Chong could not help but quiver.

"Demon Cult members really have committed too many cruel crimes," he thought. "So when Qu Yang and his granddaughter saved me, they must have had ill intentions. When Master asks me again if I will kill with no hesitation when I see members of the Demon Cult, my answer will be: Why should I hesitate? Of course I will draw my sword and attack with no question asked."

Finally able to think it through, Linghu Chong had an ease of mind. With a long roar, he jumped backwards toward the opening of the cave. Turning his body around while still in mid-air, he opened his eyes again after landing squarely on the ground. Looking down at his feet, he found his feet almost on the edge of the steep cliff, only two feet from the very brink of the cliff. If he had used just a little more strength when he jumped up and had landed two more feet further, he would have fallen into the bottomless abyss and have his body smashed into pieces. He had actually calculated the distance well in his head before he closed his eyes and jumped backwards. Since he had made his mind up to kill the Demon Cult members on first sight and didn't have any more burdens on his mind, he just wanted to have a little risky fun.

"I am still not brave enough. I should have jumped at least another feet closer to the edge for the real fun," Linghu Chong thought, when sounds of giggles and clapping suddenly rose from behind.

"Big apprentice brother! That was so cool!" It was the voice of Yue Lingshan.

Linghu Chong was very delighted. He turned around and saw Yue Lingshan carrying a meal basket.

"Big apprentice brother, I've brought you your dinner," Yue Lingshan announced happily. She sat the meal basket on the ground, went into the cave, and sat on the big rock facing the rock wall. "This is a really cool trick of yours! Let me give it a try."

Linghu Chong knew that this trick was indeed a very dangerous one. Even when he tried it earlier, he was ready to give it all up. Yue Lingshan's Kung Fu

skills were much less compared to his, and if she couldn't calculate her strength right, it would be disastrous. But because she was really in the mood at the moment, he couldn't hold her back. So he stood right next to the brim of the cliff and waited.

Intending to make sure she could beat the big apprentice brother, Yue Lingshan went over the calculation in her head quickly and then pushed the ground hard with her toes. After her body had left the ground, she also turned her body around in the mid-air. Hoping to land closer to the edge of the cliff than Linghu Chong did, she used a little bit extra strength, but when her body started to fall, fear suddenly overwhelmed her and she had to open her eyes. Seeing the bottomless abyss right in front of her eyes, she screamed in terror.

Linghu Chong reached out and caught her left arm while she was still in the air. When Yue Lingshan landed back onto the ground, she found her feet only one foot away from the very brink of the cliff. It was indeed closer than what Linghu Chong had achieved. Before her heart even had time to fall back into her chest, she was already claiming her victory.

"Big apprentice brother, I landed further than you did!"

Seeing her frightened face as white as a sheet, Linghu Chong patted her gingerly on the back. "Better not try this trick again. If Master or Master-Wife ever hear about this, they would definitely scold me harshly, maybe even punish me for another year of meditation facing the wall here."

Yue Lingshan felt a little better now. She took two steps back and said with a big grin, "Then I need to be punished too. We can meditate facing the wall here together. Wouldn't that be fun? We can have a contest everyday to see who can jump further."

"Us two, meditate here together everyday?" Linghu Chong repeated the words while throwing a glance at the cave, a breeze of happiness swelling in his heart, thinking, "If I get to spend an entire year together with the little apprentice sister, here, without any disruptions, then I'd be as happy as a worry-free fairy. Alas, it will never happen."

“I am afraid that Master will have you meditate in the ‘House of Integrity’ and ban you from leaving there, then we won’t be able to see each other for an entire year,” he said.

“That’s not fair!” Yue Lingshan immediately complained. “How come you can have fun here, and I have to be a prisoner in the ‘House of Integrity’?” Knowing clearly that her parents would have never allowed her to accompany the big apprentice brother here on the cliff, she changed the subject.

“Big apprentice brother, Mom told Monkey Six to bring you food everyday at first. I told Monkey Six, ‘Sixth apprentice brother, I know you are a monkey and all that, but climbing up and down the ‘Cliff of Contemplation’ is no easy task. Why don’t you let me help you and do it for you? So, how are you going to repay me for this favor?’ Monkey Six said, ‘I dare not to loaf on the job given by Master-Wife. Besides, big apprentice brother is the one that treats me the best. I am so glad that I’ll be bringing food to him for an entire year and will be able to see him once everyday. I don’t mind even if it’s no easy task.’ Big apprentice brother, don’t you think Monkey Six is very mean?”

“Well, he was telling the truth.” Linghu Chong smiled.

Yue Lingshan continued. “Monkey Six also said, ‘I’ve always wanted to ask for advice from big apprentice brother about Kung Fu questions. But every time as soon as you show up, you’d be kicking me away, not allowing any more conversation with the big apprentice brother.’ Big apprentice brother, do I ever do things like that? Isn’t Monkey Six talking garbage here? He then said, ‘Hey, for the entire next year, I will be the only one who can go up the ‘Cliff of Contemplation’ to see big apprentice brother. You won’t even have a chance.’ I got mad, but he paid no attention. Later…later….”

“Later you threatened him with your sword?” Linghu Chong guessed.

“No.” Yue Lingshan shook her head. “Later I got real upset and started crying. Monkey Six then came to me and begged me to bring food to you.”

Staring at her cute little face, Linghu Chong could see the slight swelling right next to her eyes. Sure enough, she must have had quite some weeping. Deeply

moved, he thought, “She is so good to me. I’d be willing to die a thousand times for her.”

Yue Lingshan opened the meal basket. Taking out two plates of dishes, together with two pairs of chopsticks and two rice bowls, she set them on a big rock with a flat top.

“Two sets of chopsticks?” Linghu Chong uttered.

“I’ll eat together with you. Look, what’s this?” Yue Lingshan’s face split into a big grin when she took out a small wine-calabash from the bottom of the meal basket.

Linghu Chong was very addicted to wine. Seeing the calabash of wine, he stood up and bowed deeply to Yue Lingshan. “Thank you so-o-o much!! I’ve been worrying about having no wine to drink for an entire year. You just saved my life!”

Yue Lingshan uncorked the wine-calabash and then passed it to Linghu Chong. “There’s not much here. I can only steal one small calabash of wine for you everyday. If I try to steal too much, my mom might find out about it,” she explained with a smile.

The Huashan Sword School rule said that an apprentice meditating on the “Cliff of Contemplation” would be prohibited from eating any meat, which was why the kitchen only prepared a big plate of boiled vegetables and a plate of Tofu for Linghu Chong. But considering herself going through the punishment together with her big apprentice brother, Yue Lingshan found the dishes quite enjoyable. After dinner, the two chatted with no specific topics for another hour. Only when it was already in the nightfall, did Yue Lingshan go down the cliff.

From then on, Yue Lingshan would bring food up the cliff around dusk everyday, and the two would have dinner together. At noon the next day, Linghu Chong simply ate the leftovers from previous day’s dinner as his lunch.

Although Linghu Chong lived alone atop the cliff, he didn’t feel lonely at all. Every morning after he woke up, he would meditate with breathing exercises and also practice the Huashan style inner energy and the sword arts taught by his

Master. He also spent time pondering upon and going over Tian Boguang's fast knife chops and the move created by Master-Wife – Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning. There was only one thrust in this The Thrust of Ning move, but it contained many techniques from Huashan style inner energy and Huashan sword arts. Linghu Chong knew that he was not at the level to execute this move yet. If he had tried to use it, he would only make a fool out of himself, so he worked hard everyday in advancing himself with his Kung Fu skills. Thus, although he was punished to meditate by facing the wall to think over his mistakes, he didn't do any of those. Other than having some chats with Yue Lingshan every evening, he simply worked hard on his Kung Fu skills with dedication. Two months passed like that, and it started to get colder and colder each day atop the cliff. Some more days later, Madam Yue finished making Linghu Chong a new set of cotton-padded coat and had Lu Dayou bring it to him up the cliff.

One day, a windstorm swept by in the morning, and by noon, big snowflakes had started swirling out of the sky. Seeing the heavy dark clouds gathering in the sky, Linghu Chong could tell that the snow would be lasting for quite a while. "The road up the cliff is very steep and dangerous. By dusk the road must be very slippery. Little apprentice sister shouldn't try to bring me any food in a day like this," he couldn't help thinking. But there was no way of communication for him to send the message. In great worries, he could only wish that Master and Master-Wife would know about this and stop little apprentice sister from coming.

"How could Master and Master-Wife not know about the fact that little apprentice sister has been bringing food for me instead of sixth apprentice brother? Maybe they just pretended to not know and paid no attention. If little apprentice sister tried to climb up the cliff today, a single slip would cost her life. I guess Master-Wife would ban her from climbing up the cliff for sure," he thought.

Linghu Chong waited anxiously until dusk, casting a glance down the cliff every once a while. Seeing that it was getting darker and darker and Yue

Lingshan never showed up, Linghu Chong felt a bit relieved. “Tomorrow morning, sixth apprentice brother will bring the food up. I hope little apprentice sister will never take on the risks.”

He was about to go back in the cave to sleep when rustling sounds of somebody climbing the snow-covered road to the cliff came to his attention. Then Yue Lingshan’s voice rose, “Big apprentice brother…big apprentice brother…!”

Greatly surprised but also greatly delighted, Linghu Chong rushed by the side of the cliff. In the shower of the big snowflakes, he could see Yue Lingshan struggle her way up the cliff in slips and skids. Restricted by the order from the Master, Linghu Chong dared not to step even one step down the cliff, only reaching out with his hand to try to catch Yue Lingshan. As soon as Yue Lingshan’s left hand touched his right hand, Linghu Chong grabbed onto her wrist and pulled her up the cliff. Under the dim light, Yue Lingshan appeared to have snow all over her; even her hairs were covered in snow. There was a big swelling on the left side of her forehead and blood was still dripping down slowly from the cut. “You…you….” Linghu Chong was lost in words.

Yue Lingshan bit her lip as if she was going to start crying. “I fell, and the meal basket fell into the valley. You…you’ll be hungry tonight.”

Linghu Chong’s heart was swelled with gratefulness and with compassion. He pressed gingerly on her wound with his sleeve and said affectionately, “Little apprentice sister! The mountain road is too slippery. You shouldn’t have come up here.”

“I don’t want you to starve. And…and, I wanted to see you,” Yue Lingshan muttered.

“But if you had fallen into the valley as a result, how could I ever face Master and Master-Wife again?” Linghu Chong said.

“Get rid of that worrying face of yours! See, I am fine here. It’s just that I am too impotent. I lost the meal basket and the wine-calabash right before I almost made it up the cliff,” Yue Lingshan said.

“I only want you to be safe. I don’t mind if I have to starve for ten days,” Linghu Chong said compassionately.

“Half way up, the road was so slippery. I gathered all my inner energy and jumped a couple of times. Hey, I actually made it up that real steep slope by the ‘Five Pine-Trees.’ I was so scared of falling down into the valley at that moment.” Yue Lingshan gasped.

“Little apprentice sister,” Linghu Chong demanded, “promise me that you’ll never risk your life for me again. If you had really fallen down into the valley, I would have jumped down after you for sure.”

Yue Lingshan looked at Linghu Chong with warmth and happiness blazing in her eyes. “Big apprentice brother, why do you worry so much? If I had fallen down on my way to bring you food, it would be the result of my own carelessness. Why would you feel so guilty?”

“It’s not about feeling guilty.” Linghu Chong shook his head slowly. “If it were sixth apprentice brother who was bringing food to me and fell down into the valley and got killed, will I jump down the valley after him?” He shook his head slowly as he spoke. “I will try my best to take good care of his parents and his family. But I won’t jump off the cliff to die along with a friend.”

“But if I had died, then you wouldn’t want to live any more?” Yue Lingshan asked slowly.

“That’s correct. Little apprentice sister, it wasn’t because you were bringing me food. Even if you were bringing food for someone else and died because of that, I wouldn’t have wanted to stay alive.”

Yue Lingshan gripped onto Linghu Chong’s hands tightly, her heart filled with tenderness and affection. “Big apprentice brother!” she called out gently.

Linghu Chong had an urge to embrace her in his arms, but still couldn’t gather enough courage to do so. The two of them simply stared at each other quietly, neither one moved an inch. Big snowflakes kept pouring down from the sky and soon the two looked almost like two snowmen.

After a long while, Linghu Chong finally broke the silence. “You can’t go down the cliff all by yourself tonight. Did Master and Master-Wife know that you came up here? It would be better if they can send someone up to get you.”

“This morning, out of the blue, Dad received a letter from the Songshan Sword School’s Alliance Chief Zuo, saying that they need to discuss something urgent, so he and Mom had left Mount Huashan today,” Yue Lingshan said.

“Then does anyone else know that you came up here?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Nope. Nobody. Second, third, forth apprentice brothers and Monkey Six all headed to Mount Songshan together with Mom and Dad, and no one knows that I came up the cliff to see you. Otherwise, Monkey Six would have fought with me for the chance to bring food up for you, and that would be very troublesome! Oh, that’s right. The chap Lin Pingzhi saw me coming up. But I told him to shut his mouth if he wanted to be spared of a good beating tomorrow.”

“Wow, what an impressive senior apprentice sister.” Linghu Chong grinned.

“Of course!” Yue Lingshan let out a big smile. “Somebody is finally calling me senior apprentice sister now. If I don’t put on the manner of a senior, what a waste would that be? It’s not like you. Everybody calls you the big apprentice brother. What do you care?” The two of them broke into a laugh.

“Well, then you can’t go back down tonight. Why don’t you spend the night in the cave and plan on going back down tomorrow morning?”

Linghu Chong held Yue Lingshan’s hand and walked her into the cave. The cave was quite small, just big enough for the two of them to stay in, and not much room left after that. The two of them sat down facing each other and chatted until late night. Yue Lingshan finally dozed off and fell asleep. Afraid that she might catch a cold, Linghu Chong took off the cotton-padded coat he was wearing and tucked it around her. In the dim light reflected by the snow outside, he could vaguely see her cute little face.

“Little apprentice sister has such deep affection for me. Even if I have to die for her and be smashed into ten thousand pieces, I will not regret it,” Linghu

Chong thought to himself.

In the silence, he soon fell into an even deeper thought. “I lost my parents when I was still little. Luckily, Master and Master-Wife brought me up and treated me like their own son. I am the head apprentice of the Huashan Sword School. Not only did I become an apprentice earlier than everybody else, but also my Kung Fu skills were way above the rest of the apprentice brothers. One day I will probably take over the responsibility from Master and become the Head Master of Huashan. Now with little apprentice sister treating me like this, it would be impossible for me to ever repay the great kindness from my Master. But I’ve always been doing things with no restrain and have kept Master and Master-Wife angry with me. I’ve really disappointed their expectations. I must thoroughly rectify my errors starting from now on. Otherwise, I would be failing not only Master and Master-Wife, but also little apprentice sister.”

Staring at the lovely hair of Yue Lingshan, which rustled gently from her breathing, Linghu Chong drifted into deep thoughts when he suddenly heard Yue Lingshan murmuring, “Hey, chap Lin, you are not behaving yourself! Come over here to let me give you a good beating!”

Linghu Chong was surprised. But seeing Yue Lingshan turning her body to the side with her eyes shut tight and her breathing falling back into a normal rhythm, he realized that she was just having a dream. Quite amused, he thought, “Finally getting to be a senior apprentice sister to someone, she probably has been acting in a real cocky way. During these days, apprentice brother Lin must have been ordered around left and right, and probably had enough of suffering. She can’t even stop bullying him in her dreams.”

Guarding by Yue Lingshan’s side, Linghu Chong did not sleep at all. Yue Lingshan had been totally exhausted the previous evening, so she slept till late the next morning before waking up. Finding Linghu Chong staring at her with a smile, she returned with a smile and then said with a yawn, “Did you wake up early in the morning?”

Linghu Chong didn’t tell her that he had not slept at all during the night. “What dream did you have? Did you beat up apprentice brother Lin?” he asked

with a grin.

“Did you hear me talk in my dreams?” Yue Lingshan asked after thinking for a moment. “This chap Lin is so stubborn. He just doesn’t want to listen to me. Ha-ha, I scold him not only in day times, but also when I am sleeping.”

“How did he get on your nerves?” Linghu Chong asked.

“I dreamed that I had asked him to go practice sword skills with me in the waterfall, but he had all kinds of excuses and simply didn’t want to go with me. I finally tricked him into going. And as soon as he got to the waterfall, I pushed him down the waterfall.”

“Oops, you can’t do that. You are going to get him killed,” Linghu Chong commented with a smile.

“It’s only a dream. It’s not real. Why are you worrying so much? Are you afraid that I really might kill this chap?”

“Well, what one thinks about in day time, one dreams about it at night. You must have really thought about killing apprentice brother Lin during the day, and you kept thinking about it, that’s why you dreamed about it at night.”

Yue Lingshan showed a winkled nose. “This chap is useless. He has been practicing the entry-level sword art form for three months now, and it still looked far from right. Yet he is the dedicated type and kept practicing days and nights. I get mad just looking at him practicing. What do I have to think about if I want to kill him? All I need to do is to raise my sword and then bring the sword swishing sideway. A sure kill with a single blow!” She slashed out with her right hand and performed a move of Huashan sword arts.

“Cloud by the Hill – Chap Lin’s head falls off!” Linghu Chong burst into laughter.

“If I actually use this Cloud by the Hill move, his head will fall off for sure.” Yue Lingshan giggled loudly.

“You are the senior apprentice sister. When a junior apprentice brother has problem with his sword practice, you should be giving him some pointers, not

drawing your sword to kill for no specific reasons. All new apprentices of the Master will be your junior apprentice brothers. What if when Master takes in one hundred new apprentices, and you decided to kill ninety-nine of them in a couple of days? What are we going to do then?" Linghu Chong joked.

"You are absolutely right about that! I'll only kill ninety-nine of them and make sure I leave one alone. If I kill all of them, then who is going to call me senior apprentice sister?" Yue Lingshan held onto the side of the rock wall and almost laughed herself silly.

"If you killed ninety-nine junior apprentice brothers, the one hundredth one would be running away for sure. You still won't be able to maintain your senior apprentice sister status." Linghu Chong suggested.

"By then I'll make you call me senior apprentice sister." Yue Lingshan grinned.

"I have no problem calling you senior apprentice sister. But are you going to kill me or not?" Linghu Chong asked jokingly.

"If you listen to my orders, then I won't kill you. If you don't, then I will." Yue Lingshan also said jokingly.

"Little apprentice sister, I beg you to show some mercy with your sword!"

It had stopped snowing by then. Afraid that when apprentice brothers and sisters found out that Yue Lingshan had been missing they might start slanderous gossips, which could be disastrous for little apprentice sister's reputation, Linghu Chong urged Yue Lingshan to go back down after some short chats.

"I want to stay here a bit longer to play. Mom and Dad are both not at home. It's very boring!" Yue Lingshan still didn't want to go.

"My good apprentice sister, in the last couple of days, I just created some more moves for the Chong-Ling Sword Art. As soon as I can leave the cliff, I'll go with you to practice sword skills in the waterfall. Alright?"

After quite some coaxing, Linghu Chong finally succeeded in getting her off the cliff back home.

At dusk that day, Gao Gengming brought food up the cliff instead. He said that

Yue Lingshan caught a cold and was having fevers. She had to rest in bed, but she thought about the big apprentice brother and had asked him to make sure not to forget bringing some wine when he brought the food up. Linghu Chong was greatly shocked and became extremely worried. He knew that she had a terrible fall the previous evening and was probably terribly scared, which caused all the illness, and wished dearly that he would be able to rush down the cliff to pay a visit to her. Although he had starved for two days, with the meal right in front of him, he only felt a lump in his throat and could hardly swallow.

Gao Gengming knew that big apprentice brother and the little apprentice sister were a loving couple, and that was why as soon as Linghu Chong heard about her illness, he became very worried. So he tried to comfort him.

"Big apprentice brother, don't be too worried. Yesterday we had a lot of snow. Little apprentice sister must have spent too much time in the snow playing and caught a cold. For people who practice inner energy like us, such a little cold is really nothing. After taking some medicines, it will be gone in no time," he persuaded.

But Yue Lingshan remained sick for over two weeks. Only after the Yue couple had returned to Mount Huashan and rid the fever for her using Huashan style inner energy was she able to recover slowly. By the time she was finally able to get up to the cliff, it was already over twenty days later.

After suffering such a long parting, both felt great joy tempered with sorrow. Yue Lingshan stared at Linghu Chong's face and burst out a cry, "Big apprentice brother, did you get sick too? How come you look so thin?"

Linghu Chong shook his head. "I didn't get sick. I…I…."

"You…you were thinking of me. And you lost weight because of the worries." Yue Lingshan suddenly realized. She burst into tears. "Big apprentice brother, I am all recovered by now."

"I watched the road days and nights waiting for this very moment. Thank Heavens! You came at last!" Linghu Chong muttered, holding Yue Lingshan's hand tightly.

“Actually, I saw you many times,” Yue Lingshan said.

“What? You saw me many times?” Linghu Chong asked in surprise.

“Yeah! While I was ill, I saw you all the time when I closed my eyes. That day when my fever worsened, Mom said that I kept talking to you in my dreams. Big apprentice brother, Mom has learned about that night when I spent the night up here.”

Linghu Chong blushed and felt some uneasiness. “Was Master-Wife angry?” he asked.

“Mom wasn’t angry about it. But…but….” Yue Lingshan suddenly blushed and stopped abruptly.

“But what?” Linghu Chong asked.

“I am not telling you,” Yue Lingshan declared.

Noticing the affected shy expression on Yue Lingshan’s face, Linghu Chong’s heart quivered. He immediately pulled himself together and said, “Little apprentice sister, you just got better. You really shouldn’t come up here so soon. I knew you were gradually getting better. Everyday when fifth apprentice brother or sixth apprentice brother brought food up for me, they all told me about you.”

“Then how come you are still so thin?” Yue Lingshan asked.

“Well, as soon as you fully recover, I will gain my weight back.” Linghu Chong answered with a smile.

“Tell me the truth. How much did you eat at each meal these days? Monkey Six said that you didn’t touch your food at all and only drank a lot of wine. He tried to persuade you, but you simply wouldn’t listen to him. Big apprentice brother, why don’t you…take good care of yourself?” At those words, tear drops started rolling in her eyes again.

“Nonsense! Don’t listen to him. Monkey Six always likes to exaggerate. Why would I only drink wine and not eat?” Linghu Chong denied.

A breeze of cold wind swept by and sent Yue Lingshan shivering. It was a very chilly day. The cliff didn't even have a single tree to block the cold wind. It was already very cold on top of Mount Huashan; it was even colder here on the cliff.

"Little apprentice sister," Linghu Chong said quickly, "you have not fully recovered yet. You'd better not catch a cold again. Go back down the cliff. Wait till one day when the sun comes out and after you have fully recovered, then you can come up to see me again."

"I'm not cold. We are getting snow and windstorms everyday. Who knows when we will have sunshine again?" Yue Lingshan complained.

"But what if you get sick again? I…I…," Linghu Chong said in a worried tone.

Seeing the thin and pallid face of Linghu Chong, Yue Lingshan thought, "If I get sick again, he'll get sick too for sure. That will surely get him killed with no one here taking care of him at all." So she had to agree. "Fine. I am leaving now. You take good care of yourself. Don't drink that much wine. Have at least three bowls of rice every meal. I'll go talk to Dad and tell him that you are not feeling well. You need more nutritious food. You can't live off only vegetables."

"I will not violate the prohibition. Seeing you getting better is enough nourish for me already. I am sure I will start gaining weight in a couple of days. My dear, please go back now," Linghu Chong urged.

"What did you call me?" Her cheeks going red, Yue Lingshan asked in a low voice, love and affection swelling in her eyes.

Feeling a little bit shy, Linghu Chong immediately answered, "I just blurted that out. Little apprentice sister, please don't mind."

"Why would I mind? I like you to call me that." Yue Lingshan replied.

Linghu Chong felt a warm current coursing through his heart. All he could think of was to embrace her tightly in his arms. But he immediately told himself, "She has shown me such affection. How could I ever disgrace her with such

disrespectful behavior?" So he turned his head aside in a hurry, and only said in a soft voice, "Walk slow when you go down the cliff, one step at a time. Take a rest if you need to. Don't just run all the way down like you used to do in other days."

"I won't," Yue Lingshan answered as she turned around slowly and walked toward the road down the cliff.

Hearing the sound of her steps getting further and further, Linghu Chong turned his head back, only seeing Yue Lingshan standing a few dozen feet away down the road staring at him. For a long while, the two just stared at each other silently.

"Walk slow. It's time for you to get back," Linghu Chong finally said.

"Yes," Yue Lingshan answered and this time really started heading back.

In that day, Linghu Chong felt a kind of joy he had never experienced before in his entire life. Sitting on the rock, he couldn't resist his urge to laugh out loud. He suddenly burst out a long roar, and it echoed around the valley again and again. The roar seemed to be shouting the words, "I am so happy! I am so happy!"

The next day, it snowed again, and sure enough, Yue Lingshan did not come up. Linghu Chong heard from Lu Dayou that she was enjoying a speedy recovery and was getting better and better everyday. That truly cheered him up.

Another twenty or so days passed before Yue Lingshan came up the cliff again. She had a basket full of Zong-Zi[51] this time. After looking at Linghu Chong's face carefully for a moment, she smiled. "You didn't lie. You sure gained quite a few pounds back."

"You've recovered well. I am so happy to see you healthy." Seeing the ruddy complexion on Yue Lingshan's cheeks, Linghu Chong also smiled.

"I've been bugging Mom every day so that I could bring your food up, but Mom just wouldn't let me. She kept saying that it was too cold, or it was too humid. She almost sounded as if as soon as I come up the cliff, I'll drop dead. I

said that big apprentice brother has stayed on the cliff for days and nights. I don't see him getting sick. Mom said that big apprentice brother has very high inner energy; I am simply not in the same league. Hey, Mom was praising about you. Aren't you happy to hear that?"

Linghu Chong nodded. "I really miss Master and Master-Wife. I wish I could see them soon."

"Yesterday I spent a whole day helping Mom wrapping Zong-Zi. I thought to myself, wouldn't it be nice if I could bring you some? And guess what? Before I even opened my mouth to ask today, Mom had already said to me, 'Take this basket of Zong-Zi to Chong.' What a surprise!"

Linghu Chong felt a lump in his throat, thinking, "Master-Wife is so nice to me."

"These Zong-Zi just came out of the pot; they are still hot. Let me peel some for you." Yue Lingshan went in the cave and started unwrapping the bamboo leaves outside of the Zong-Zi. Soon, an appetizing smell filled the small cave.

Taking the unwrapped Zong-Zi Yue Lingshan handed to him, Linghu Chong took a bite. Even though the Zong-Zi only had vegetarian stuffing, the mixture of straw mushrooms, lotus seeds, broad beans and other ingredients gave it a very delicious flavor.

"Little Lin and I picked those straw mushrooms the day before yesterday…," Yue Lingshan bragged.

"Little Lin?" Linghu Chong was lost.

"Oh, That's junior apprentice brother Lin. I've been calling him Little Lin these days. He came to me the day before yesterday and told me that there was straw mushrooms under those pine trees at the east slope. He even went with me and spent half a day picking them. But we only found enough to fill a half basket. While there's not much, it sure is tasty, isn't it?"

"Yummy! I almost swallowed my tongue together with it. So, little apprentice sister, you don't yell at him now?" Linghu Chong asked.

“Why not! Anytime he doesn’t listen to me, I yell at him. But he sure learned how to behave himself these days, so I don’t yell at him as much now. And when he works hard and progress a little with his sword practice, I praise him a little, ‘Aha, Little Lin, this move looks not too shabby, much better than yesterday. But it’s still not fast enough. Practice more! Practice more!’ Ha-ha!” Yue Lingshan said amusingly.

“Are you teaching him sword arts?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Yep! He speaks Fujian dialect. Apprentice brothers and sisters are having a hard time understanding him. I’ve been to Fuzhou before and it’s easier for me to understand his words, so Dad asked me to help him with his sword art whenever I have time. Big apprentice brother, since I can’t come up here to see you all the time, when I get bored, I might as well teach him a couple of moves. Little Lin is no dummy. He can learn quickly.”

“I see. So you are the senior apprentice sister and the instructor. No wonder he dares not to disobey you.” Linghu Chong laughed.

“I wouldn’t say that. Yesterday when I asked him to go hunt pheasants with me, he didn’t want to go, and said that he had not gotten the moves White Aurora Shooting to Sun and Heaven Hanging Upside Down right and needed to practice more.”

Linghu Chong was a bit surprised. He asked, “He has only been in our Huashan Sword School for several months, how come he is already practicing moves like White Aurora Shooting to Sun and Heaven Hanging Upside Down? Little apprentice sister, our Huashan sword arts require the practitioner to follow each of the steps. It would be harmful to try to advance too quickly.”

“Don’t worry about it. I won’t be teaching him irresponsibly,” Yue Lingshan explained. “Little Lin is always eager to excel. He practices days and nights. Every time when I want to chat a little, in less than three sentences, he would start asking questions about sword arts. Sword forms that will take others three months to grasp will only take him half a month. When I wanted him to go play with me, he would never agree frankly.”

Linghu Chong fell silent, and all of a sudden, some kind of indescribable annoyance filled his heart. He took another bite, and then just stared at the Zong-Zi in his hand blankly.

"Big apprentice brother, did you swallow your tongue? Why have you stopped talking?" Yue Lingshan pulled at Linghu Chong's sleeves.

Absentmindedly, Linghu Chong put the remaining of the Zong-Zi in his mouth. Somehow, the supposedly delicious Zong-Zi got stuck in his mouth and he couldn't swallow it down.

Yue Lingshan pointed at him and giggled hard. "Aren't you too impatient? See, you got it stuck to your teeth."

With a wry smile, Linghu Chong swallowed hard and finally managed to send it down his throat. He thought to himself, "I am really being stupid! Little apprentice sister loves to play. Since I can't go down the cliff, she wanted apprentice brother Lin to be her company. That's really quite normal. Why am I being so narrow-minded and getting mad at that?" So he relaxed a little and said with a smile, "You must have worked on this one. See how tight did you wrap it? It got my tongue and my teeth all stuck together."

Yue Lingshan burst into loud laughter. After a few moments, she commented, "Poor big apprentice brother, who has to be a prisoner on top of the cliff. See how gluttonous you are!"

The next time when she came up the cliff again, it was already over ten days later. Other than the meal basket, she also brought a small basket with half basket of pine nuts and chestnuts.

During the ten days, Linghu Chong's neck probably had gotten longer from all the anxious looking down the cliff. Every time he asked about little apprentice sister from Lu Dayou when he brought food up, Lu Dayou would always look queer and speak in an odd way. Linghu Chong got suspicious, but simply couldn't get a straight answer out of him. When Linghu Chong pressed really hard sometimes, Lu Dayou would always answer, "Little apprentice sister is doing great. She practices sword art diligently everyday. Maybe Master didn't

want her up the cliff so she wouldn't be disturbing big apprentice brother's meditation here."

Now when he finally saw Yue Lingshan again after all the waiting, his joy was unspeakable. She seemed to be glowing with health and radiating vigor, looking even prettier than how she looked before the illness. Linghu Chong couldn't help but think, "She has fully recovered. Why did she wait so long before coming up the cliff again? Did Master or Master-Wife ban her from coming up here?"

Seeing the puzzled look in Linghu Chong's eyes, Yue Lingshan suddenly blushed. "Big apprentice brother, I hadn't come up to see you for so many days. Are you mad at me?" she asked.

"Why would I be mad? Master and Master-Wife must have told you not to come up, haven't you?" Linghu Chong said.

"Yeah. Mom just taught me a new sword art form. She said that this sword art form has so many complicated variations, if I had come up the cliff to chat with you, I'd lose my focus."

"Which sword art form?" Linghu Chong asked curiously.

"Take a guess!" Yue Lingshan challenged.

"Yang-Wu Sword Form?"

"Nope."

"Xi-Wu Sword Form?"

"Try again!" Yue Lingshan shook her head.

"Could it be the Fair-Maiden Sword Form?"

"That's my mom's specialty. I am not even qualified to give the Fair-Maiden Sword Form a try yet." Yue Lingshan stuck her tongue out and made a face. "Ok, let me tell you. It's The Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword!" she said triumphantly.

Linghu Chong was taken by slight surprise. "You start to learn The Nineteen

Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword now? Oh, that really is a very complicated sword form," he said happily. All his suspicion melted away.

Although the set of Jade Maiden Sword form only had nineteen stances, every stance had very complicated changes and variations. If the practitioner couldn't memorize all those, he wouldn't even be able to fully use just one stance. He had heard from Master about it before, "The Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword mainly focus in the fancy variations and changes. The form is quite different from our school's main focus – Inner Energy Drives the Sword. Since female apprentices tend to have less strength from their arms, when they encounter with a tougher opponent, they can use this sword form to counter with artful moves. But all the male apprentices have no need to learn it." That's why even Linghu Chong himself had not learned it before. Based on Yue Lingshan's current skill level, it seemed that she was not ready to learn this sword form yet. Before, Linghu Chong, Yue Lingshan and some other apprentice brothers and sisters had watched how Master and Master-Wife showed the set of sword form. Master had attacked using many different sword art forms from different sword schools and styles, but Master-Wife only defended with this Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword form. The Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword were actually well matched with the hundreds of excellent sword moves in a dozen different styles. All the apprentices watching by the side were dumbfounded in amazement. Yue Lingshan had begged her mother to teach her this sword form by then, and Madam Yue had answered, "You are still too young. First, you don't have the skill level yet. Secondly, this sword art form requires a lot of brainpower. You should probably wait till you are twenty years old before learning this sword form. In addition, this sword form is used for countering sword moves from other sword schools. If you only work with apprentice brothers and sisters in our own school, you'd end up practicing how to counter Huashan sword art. Chong knows a lot of different Kung Fu and he probably remembers many different sword moves from other sword schools. He can probably practice with you in the future." This was an episode that happened about two years ago, and nobody ever mentioned it again. Who'd expect that Master-Wife actually taught her this sword form?

“Master must be in a real good mood these days to practice sword art with you everyday,” Linghu Chong said.

This sword form focused on adapting itself to changing conditions and not restricting oneself to certain moves or postures, that was why right from the beginning, the practitioner would need to practice with a partner. Within the Huashan Sword School, Yue Buqun and Linghu Chong were the only two having good knowledge about sword arts from other sword schools. Thus, since Yue Lingshan was learning The Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword, Yue Buqun had to be working with her to attack her with other sword school’s sword moves.

Yue Lingshan flushed slightly again. “Dad doesn’t have that much time. It was Little Lin who helped me to practice,” she said bashfully.

“Apprentice brother Lin? Does he know many sword moves from other sword schools?” Linghu Chong asked in surprise.

“He only knows the family Kung Fu of his – Evil-Resisting Sword Art. Dad said that even though the Evil-Resisting Sword Art isn’t that powerful at all, it has some interesting variations in the moves, which would be good for me to compare to. He wanted me to counter Evil-Resisting Sword Art as the starting point for my Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword training.”

“I see.” Linghu Chong nodded.

“Big apprentice brother, are you upset?”

“No. Why would I be upset? You are learning an advanced form of our Huashan sword arts now. I feel very happy for you! Why should I be upset?”

“But you don’t look very happy.”

“Which stance are you on now?” Linghu Chong squeezed out a smile and asked.

Yue Lingshan didn’t answer. After a long time, she finally said, “I see. Mom said to let you help me practice, but I am having Little Lin do it, that’s why you are upset. Am I right? But think about it, big apprentice brother, in the short

while, you won't be able to come down from the cliff, and I am just too anxious to learn this sword form. I just can't wait for you any longer."

"You are talking childishly again. We are all apprentice brothers and sisters, so it's all the same no matter who practices with you," Linghu Chong said in laughter. He paused for a second and then went on, "I know you'd rather have apprentice brother Lin practice with you than having me."

"Nonsense!" Yue Lingshan blushed again. "Compared to you, Little Lin's skill level is miles away. What good does it do me practicing with him?"

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "Apprentice brother Lin has only joined the Huashan Sword School for several months. Even if he were a super genius, how good could he get?" So he said, "Of course there's benefit here. Wouldn't you feel great when you can beat him with every single one of your moves?"

"Humph, just with his clumsy Evil-Resisting Sword Art, does he actually expect to defeat me?" Yue Lingshan giggled.

Linghu Chong had long known that the little apprentice sister was the type who always wanted to win. When she sparred with Lin Pingzhi, most likely she was able to use the newly learned sword art with facility, and was able to enjoy advantage with every single move. Lin Pingzhi's Kung Fu level was very low, and he probably made a perfect spar partner. When Linghu Chong thought about that, his depression went away immediately. "Then let me try a couple moves with you. Let's see how good you are with your Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword," he suggested, smiling.

Yue Lingshan was overjoyed. "Wonderful! Today…today before I came up…I actually planned…." With a shy smile, she drew her long sword.

"You came up the cliff today just to show me the sword art you just learned? Good, go ahead!" Linghu Chong said.

"Big apprentice brother, your sword skills have always been better than mine. But after I learn this set of Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword well, you won't be able to bully me anymore." Yue Lingshan grinned.

“When did I ever bully you? You are wronging the good guy here.”

“Don’t you want to draw your sword?” Yue Lingshan got into her starting position.

“Not so soon!” Linghu Chong said. He shifted his left hand into the starting position and then thrust his right hand out quickly. “This is from the Qingcheng Sword School’s Pine-Wind Sword Art. This move is called Thundering Pine Wave!” He pretended that his hand was a sword and thrust it toward Yue Lingshan’s shoulder.

Yue Lingshan turned to the side and stepped back while waving her sword to block toward Linghu Chong’s hand. “Look out!” she called out.

“Don’t try to be nice. I’ll draw my sword when I can’t defend myself.”

“How dare you fight my Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword with your bare hands?” Yue Lingshan snapped.

“That’s because you have not mastered it. Once you master it, I won’t be able to fight you with my bare hands.”

Yue Lingshan had been practicing the Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword very hard these days. She felt that she had advanced quite a lot in her sword skills, and even if compared to first class sword masters in the Martial World, she would be no less. The reason why she didn’t come up the cliff for the last ten days was to keep this a secret from Linghu Chong, so she could give him a big surprise with one brilliant feat, and thus make Linghu Chong think highly of her. But now he was actually belittling her and only wanted to fight her Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword with his bare hands, she couldn’t help but feeling annoyed.

“If by accident I cut you or something, don’t blame me. Don’t tell my mom or dad either.” She pulled a long face.

“That’s of course. You do your best. If you give ground in anyway, you wouldn’t be showing your true skills.” Linghu Chong’s left hand suddenly chopped out as he spoke. “Look out!” he yelled.

“What…what! Is your left hand a sword too?” Yue Lingshan shouted in astonishment.

If Linghu Chong had really chopped down, Yue Lingshan would have been injured in the shoulder. He held on his strength and explained, “Some people in the Qingcheng Sword School do use double swords.”

“That’s right! I’ve seen some Qingcheng apprentices carrying double swords. How did I forget that? Watch out!” Yue Lingshan launched a counter attack.

Seeing that the thrust drifted swiftly, Linghu Chong figured this must be an advanced move out of the Jade Maiden Sword. He praised, “This one is very good. Just not fast enough.”

“Still not fast enough? A little bit faster, I would have chopped off your arm.”

“Go ahead and try to chop it off.” Linghu Chong used his right hand as the sword and chopped toward her left arm.

Yue Lingshan was a bit annoyed. She waved her sword quickly and swiftly and started using the Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword she had been practicing one move after another. Out of the total nineteen stances of moves, she could only remember nine, and within the nine stances, she could really only use six. But these six stances were already quite powerful. Whenever she pointed the sword somewhere, Linghu Chong would have a hard time getting close to her in that direction. Linghu Chong circled around her as they fought. Every time when he tried to attack his way in, he was forced back by her sharp sword moves. Once he had to jump backward quickly and ended up bumping his back on a piece of rock that was sticking out.

Yue Lingshan was very pleased with herself. She asked in a grin, “Don’t you want to draw your sword now?”

“Just a little bit longer,” Linghu Chong said, as he lured her into using one move after another out of the Jade Maiden Sword form. After a few more moments of fighting, noticing Yue Lingshan used the same six stances again and again, Linghu Chong figured it out. He abruptly stepped forward and chopped with his right knife hand. “Killer move from the Pine-Wind Sword Art! Watch

out!" he yelled. The chop looked as if it had a lot of strength in it.

Seeing the knife hand swishing down toward her head, Yue Lingshan slashed her sword upwards. That was exactly the move Linghu Chong had expected. He reached out his left hand in a flash and flicked out with his middle finger. "Ring," his finger knocked on the blade of the long sword. Yue Lingshan only felt a burning pain in her palm and could no longer hold on to the sword. The sword flew out of her grip and fell straight down the bottomless abyss.

Her face as pale as a white sheet, Yue Lingshan stared silently at Linghu Chong in disbelief and astonishment, biting her lower lip hard with her upper teeth. "Oops!" Linghu Chong cried, and immediately rushed by the edge of the cliff, but the sword has disappeared in the bottomless valley and could no longer be seen. Suddenly, a green shadow flashed by the side of the cliff. It seemed to have been a piece of a robe. But when Linghu Chong looked more carefully, it was already gone. His heart thumped hard as he thought inwardly, "What's wrong with me? What's wrong with me? I've practiced and sparred with little apprentice sister thousands of times before. Every time I would give ground to her and had never acted so mercilessly like today. I am really being ridiculous!"

Yue Lingshan cast a sideway look down the valley as she cried out loud, "The sword! The sword!"

Linghu Chong was stunned when he suddenly remembered that little apprentice sister's long sward was an exceptional sword that could cut steel. It was called "Sword of the Green Pool," and was acquired by Master in Dragon-Spring, Zhejiang Province[52] three years ago. Ever since little apprentice sister laid eyes on it, she could not keep her mind off it. She had begged for it from Master many times and Master never agreed until her eighteenth birthday this year when Master gave the sword to her as her birthday present. Now the sword had fallen into the bottomless valley, there would be no way to retrieve it back.

"What a terrible mistake have I made?" Linghu Chong regretted full heartedly.

Tears rolling in her eyes, Yue Lingshan stomped her left foot in frustration and then turned around to leave.

“Little apprentice sister!” Linghu Chong called out, but Yue Lingshan ignored him and started heading off the cliff. Linghu Chong chased her to the side of the cliff and reached out for her arm, but as soon as his fingers touched Yue Lingshan’s sleeve, he drew his arm back and watched her leave without ever looking back.

Feeling very depressed, Linghu Chong thought to himself, “Normally I would have put up with her and give in to her, but why did I flick away her sword today? Am I envying her because Master-Wife taught her the Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword? No, no way. It can’t be! The Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword were meant for female apprentices, and wouldn’t I be happier that little apprentice sister is learning more Kung Fu? Ah, probably it’s because I have been alone on the cliff for too long and have become ill tempered. I only wish she would come up the cliff again tomorrow so I can apologize to her sincerely.”

That night Linghu Chong could not sleep. He sat cross-legged on a rock and tried to work on his breathing exercise, but he simply could not stay focus, and he dared not to continue. Moonlight shone through the opening of the cave and lit the rock wall. Noticing the words “Feng Qingyang” carved on the rock wall again, Linghu Chong reached out and started writing following the strokes carved on the rock wall. Suddenly, the wall darkened as a shadow was cast upon the rock wall. In astonishment, Linghu Chong picked up the sword by his side, with no time to unsheathe the sword, he just thrust it toward his back. When it was half way out, he suddenly retracted his strength and turned around as he called out in joy, “Little apprentice sister!” But it wasn’t his little apprentice sister.

A thin and tall man stood about a dozen feet away from the cave. Dressed in a green robe, he stood with his back toward the moonlight; a piece of green cloth covered his face, leaving only his eyes showing. Linghu Chong didn’t recall ever seeing this man before, so he yelled, “Who are you?” and jumped out of the cave with his sword drawn. The man didn’t answer, but raised his right hand and chopped twice toward his front-right, which turned out to be two moves out

of the Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword Yue Lingshan had used in the day. Linghu Chong was greatly surprised, although by now he had dropped most of his animosity toward the man.

"Are you a senior in our sword school?" he asked, when suddenly a strong wind of energy came upon his face. With no time to think, Linghu Chong slashed out with his sword, but at the meantime, a slight pain came from his left shoulder. It had been hit by the man's hand. It seemed that the man did not use any inner energy when he struck with his hand. In great fear and astonishment, Linghu Chong hurriedly slid a couple of steps toward his left. The man did not follow up, and simply used his hand as a sword, and within moments of time, he had shown the dozens of moves included in those six stances of the Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword smoothly with no interruptions. The dozens of moves were executed as if they were all part of one big move. The speed he had shown was simply unthinkable. Under the moonlight, Linghu Chong could see clearly that every move had been used by Yue Lingshan during the day. But how could he have executed all those dozens of moves as if it was just one big move? Linghu Chong's jaw dropped and his body seemed to have frozen. The man flicked his long sleeves and walked off around the back of the cliff.

It was already a good while later when Linghu Chong was finally able to regain himself. "Senior Master! Senior Master!" he called out loud, but by the time he ran to the backside of the cliff, all he found was the sliverish moonlight reflected by the ground. There was no one to be found.

"Who is he?" Linghu Chong gasped and thought to himself. "When he showed the Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword, I would stand no chance flicking away his sword, and every move from him could have chopped my hand off. No, it's not only my hand. He could have stabbed me anywhere he wants or cut me anywhere he wishes. With those six stances of the Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword, I would be like a piece of meat on somebody's chopping block – be totally at his mercy. It turned out that this sword form is actually so powerful." He pondered upon it a bit more and then thought, "Apparently the power didn't come from the sword moves but the way

he used his sword. With such a method, I wouldn't be able to defend myself no matter what kind of ordinary moves he uses. Who is this man? Why is he on top of Mount Huashan?"

He pondered upon the question for a long time but still had no clue. Finally he gave up, thinking that Master and Master-Wife must know about this man, and when little apprentice sister comes up the cliff again tomorrow, he could ask her to inquire about it from Master and Master-Wife.

But Yue Lingshan didn't come up the next day, nor did she come the third day or the forth day. Only after a total of eighteen days, she finally came up the cliff together with Lu Dayou. Having longed for Yue Lingshan for eighteen days and nights, Linghu Chong had a stomach full of words to tell her, but with Lu Dayou by the side, he simply could not spill them out.

After dinner, knowing Linghu Chong's feelings, Lu Dayou suggested, "Big apprentice brother, little apprentice sister, since you two haven't seen each other for many days, why don't you two have a good chat here. I'll take the basket down first."

"Monkey Six, are you trying to run away from me? We came together, so we'll leave together too," Yue Lingshan said with a grin as she stood up.

"Little apprentice sister, I have something to talk to you about," Linghu Chong said.

"Sure. Monkey Six, stop right there. Big apprentice brother has some advice for us," Yue Lingshan said to Lu Dayou.

"It's not about advice." Linghu Chong shook his head. "That 'Sword of the Green Pool' of yours…."

Yue Lingshan cut him short quickly. "I've told Mom that I was being too careless and the sword slipped out of my hand down the valley when I was practicing the Nineteen Stances of Jade Maiden Sword. It's nowhere to be found now. I had a good weep. Mom not only didn't yell at me, but she also comforted me and promised to get me another good blade next time. This really is history now. There's no need to mention it again." She shrugged with a smile on her

face.

The more easily she acted, the more disturbed Linghu Chong felt. “After I fulfill my punishment so I can get down the cliff again, I’ll find a good blade to repay you.” Linghu Chong promised.

“We are apprentice brothers and sisters. Don’t worry about the sword. And it did fall into the deep valley because I couldn’t hold on to it. It’s all because I didn’t really master my Kung Fu skills. Who else is there to blame? Let’s just ‘gi’ton witit’n falla ya’n distini’.” Yue Lingshan started giggling.

“What did you say?” Linghu Chong was lost.

“Oh, yeah, you don’t know. Little Lin always liked to say ‘get on with it and follow your own destiny,’ but he’s got a heavy accent, so I imitate him to make fun of him. Ha-ha! ‘Gi’ton witit’n falla ya’n distini’!”

Linghu Chong squeezed out a dry smile. He suddenly remembered something. “That day when little apprentice sister used the Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword, why did I pick the Pine-Wind Sword Art of the Qingcheng Sword School as the counter? In my subconscious, did I actually want to counter apprentice brother Lin’s Evil-Resisting Sword Art? His entire family and the Fortune Prestige Escort House of his Lin family were completely ruined by the Qingcheng Sword School. Was I intentionally being sarcastic? Why was I so harsh and mean?” Then he thought some more about it. “The other day, in the Jade House of Hengshan Town, I almost got killed from Yu Canghai’s palm strike. It was all because of apprentice brother Lin’s yelling of ‘A senior bullies a junior, how shameless’ with disregard of his own safety, Yu Canghai held back the strike. I really owe apprentice brother Lin the big favor of life and death.” At that thought, he felt very ashamed of himself as he heaved a long breath out.

“Apprentice brother Lin is very bright and he also works hard. After the last couple of months of training by little apprentice sister, he probably has progressed very rapidly. It’s a pity that within the year of my punishment, I can’t leave the cliff. Otherwise, because of the favor I owe him, I really should have helped him with his sword training myself.” Linghu Chong sighed.

“How did Little Lin do you a favor? How come I have never heard anything about it from him?” Yue Lingshan raised her eyebrows.

“Of course he won’t be bragging about it himself.” Linghu Chong explained and then told the story about that day at the Jade House.

Yue Lingshan seemed to have lost in her thought for a moment. “No wonder Dad said that he had the character of the chivalry kind, and that’s why Dad saved him from the ‘Hunchback of the North.’ He is so muddle-headed. So he actually came out boldly for you, too, with that loud yell of his.” At these words, she couldn’t help and giggled some more. “With his little Kung Fu skills, he actually saved the big apprentice brother of Huashan Sword School, and also came forward for the sake of Huashan Head Master’s daughter and whacked the beloved son of the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School. Just with those two achievements, he could have gained a lot of fame in the Martial World. But nobody would have guessed that such a big hero, who likes to defend people against an injustice, ha-ha, Big Hero Lin Pingzhi, has such terrible Kung Fu skills?”

“One can learn Kung Fu skills, but the character of the chivalry type comes when one gets born. And that’s what differentiate people’s moral standings,” Linghu Chong said.

“Dad and Mom said the same thing about Little Lin.” Yue Lingshan smiled. “Big apprentice brother, other than the character of chivalry, there’s one more thing that both of you have.”

“What other thing? Bad temper?” Linghu Chong asked.

“It’s the feeling of pride. Both of you are quite proud of yourself,” Yue Lingshan answered.

Lu Dayou suddenly cut in the conversation. “Big apprentice brother is the leader of all the apprentice brothers and sisters, it’s natural for him to feel the pride. Who the heck does that chap Lin think he is? What makes him think he is worthy to show his pride in the Huashan Sword School?” A tone of hostility toward Lin Pingzhi was clearly shown.

“Monkey Six, when did apprentice brother Lin offend you?” Linghu Chong asked in shock.

“He never offended me. It’s just that we apprentice brothers don’t like his attitude,” Lu Dayou said irritably.

“Sixth apprentice brother, what’s the matter with you? Why are you always so hard on Little Lin? He is your junior apprentice brother. As a senior, you should treat him nice and not pick on his mistakes,” Yue Lingshan said.

“If he knows his place and behaves himself, I’d have no problem with him, otherwise, I would be the first one to jump on to him.” Lu Dayou grunted.

“How did he not know his place and behave himself?” Yue Lingshan challenged.

“He…he…he…,” Lu Dayou answered but stopped short.

“What are you trying to say? Why are you hesitating?” Yue Lingshan charged.

“I hope I got it wrong and thought of it in the wrong way,” Lu Dayou croaked.

Yue Lingshan blushed slightly and stopped asking. Lu Dayou said that he wanted to go back now, and Yue Lingshan left the cliff together with him.

Seized with gloominess, Linghu Chong stood by the edge of the cliff and gazed at their receding figures until they turned around the shoulder of the pass. Soon, Yue Lingshan’s loud and clear singing wafted up the cliff from behind the mountain shoulder. It was a lively and smooth tune. Linghu Chong grew up together with Yue Lingshan and had listened to her singing for many times, but he had never heard of this tune before. Yue Lingshan had always been singing Shanxi[53] folk songs – the kind that had a long ending sound that would be echoing around the valleys. But this one sounded more like water drops dripping down a fountain and each word was short and clear. Linghu Chong tried to listen to the lyrics, but could only hear something like “sisters, let’s go uphill to pick tea.” She had some odd pronunciations; Linghu Chong could hear the words, but he could only recognize probably the meaning of one out of ten words. He thought, “When did little apprentice sister learn this new song? It is a

very pleasant song. I'll have to ask her to sing this one again from the beginning next time when she comes up the cliff."

Suddenly, he almost felt like a hammer had just smashed his chest as he realized, "This is a Fujian[54] folk song. Apprentice brother Lin must have taught her this one!"

That night, Linghu Chong couldn't sleep. Disquieting thoughts surged in his mind. It seemed as if Yue Lingshan's lively but hard to understand singing still echoed around his ears. "Linghu Chong! You've always been so unrestrained and carefree before, but today you can't even put aside your worry just because of a song. How can you still call yourself a true man?" he kept blaming himself.

Knowing very clearly that he shouldn't be still thinking about it, but the Fujian folk song sang by Yue Lingshan kept wafting around his ears. Linghu Chong felt great pain in his heart. In frustration, he picked up his sword and chopped and slashed toward the rock wall like a mad man. Feeling a stream of inner energy rising from his abdomen, he thrust the sword out, the posture and the way he used his energy happened to be just like the move taught by Madam Yue – Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning. With a piercing sound, the sword surprisingly went into the rock wall all the way to the sword handle.

Linghu Chong was astounded. He knew too well that no matter how quickly he had advanced his Kung Fu skills in the last several months, it would still be impossible for him to jab his sword into the rock wall all the way to the handle. That would require putting superb inner energy onto the sword blade so that the blade could be jabbed into a rock as if the rock was a rotten piece of wood. Even Master or Master-Wife wouldn't have such magical skills. He stood there as if he was in a trance, then he pulled at the sword handle and drew the blade out when he suddenly realized from the feel with his hand: the rock wall was only a very thin layer of rock. It was empty after about two or three inches deep – there was a cave on the other side of the rock wall.

Linghu Chong's mind was now filled with curiosity. He lifted his sword and thrust again. "Clank!" This time the long sword broke in half. It turned out that

because he didn't use enough inner energy, the sword couldn't even penetrate a two or three inches thick layer of rock. He spilled out a couple swears and then picked up a big rock from outside the cave. This time he used all his might and threw the rock at the rock wall, which smashed the rock wall hard and produced some vague echoes from behind the rock wall – apparently there was quite some spacious room behind it. He smashed the rock against the rock wall once again, and this time with a loud bang, the rock went through the rock wall and landed on the floor in the other side. Loud bangs kept rising from the other end as the rock rolled on the floor.

The discovery of such a secret cave drove all his depression and worries completely out. He picked up another rock and started smashing again. Soon, a hole big enough for his head to go through appeared on the rock wall. He widened the hole some more and then climbed in with a lit torch. Inside was a narrow corridor kind of pathway. Suddenly, he broke into a cold sweat as he looked down. A skeleton lay still on the ground facing down right next to his feet. This scene was far from what Linghu Chong had expected.

He calmed himself down a bit and thought, "Could this be a tomb? But why would the skeleton lay on the floor facing down instead of lying facing up? And this narrow corridor doesn't look like a tomb corridor either."

He looked down at the skeleton again. The clothing on the skeleton had rotten into dusts. Two huge axes lay on the ground next to the skeleton, shining as they reflected the light from the torch. He picked one of the axes up. It was very heavy, at least over forty pounds. He raised the axe and chopped it at the rock wall by his side. "Clank!" A big chunk of rock was chopped off. He was stunned.

"This axe is too sharp to be a normal axe. It must have belonged to a senior master in the Martial World as his weapon." The spot where the axe had just chopped by looked very smooth, almost as smooth as a Tofu Cube being cut by a knife, and there were many chop marks on all sides of the corridor. He thought about it for a short moment and was stunned by his conclusion. He walked down the path a bit more with the torch raised high, only finding axe

chopping marks all over the cave. He found himself stupefied.

"So the pathway was actually made by chops from this man using his sharp axes. Right, he was taken prisoner in the middle of the mountain, so he tried to use his sharp axes to dig a way out of the mountain. But he fell short of success and died exhausted with only inches from breaking out. Alas, he was certainly very unfortunate."

He walked about another one hundred feet and the pathway still did not end. He thought, "That man dug such a long pathway. Such strong will and determination together with his superb Kung Fu level must have been extraordinary." He couldn't help but feel great respect toward the mysterious man.

Some steps deeper down the path, two more skeletons appeared, one sitting down leaning against the wall, the other one huddled up and lay on the floor. "So there were actually more than one trapped in the middle of the mountain," Linghu Cong figured. "But this is an important site of our Huashan Sword School; outsiders shouldn't be able to have access here. Could all these skeletons be senior masters of our Huashan Sword School who violated school rules and were punished to die here?"

He walked another one hundred feet and followed the pathway when it swerved to the left. Suddenly, a huge cave, spacious enough to hold over a thousand people, appeared right in front of his eyes. There were seven more skeletons in the cave, some sitting down, some lying on the floor. All of them had weapons lying next to them. Among those weapons were a pair of iron plates, a pair of Judge-Pens, an iron staff, a copper club, a weapon that looked like a thunderbolt mace, a fanged tri-tip and double-blade halberd, and also some kind of a weapon that looked like a combination of knife and sword that he had never seen before.

"These people with those special weapons and the one using the axes couldn't have been apprentices of our sword school," he told himself.

Not far from where he stood, over a dozen long swords piled on the ground in

disorder. He walked by and randomly picked one up. The sword was shorter than average but the blade had double the width of a regular sword; it was also much heavier. He thought, “This is the kind of sword used by the Taishan Sword School.” Among the rest of the swords, some were light and very flexible, which was the type of sword used by the Heng-Shan Sword School. Some had crooked blade and were among one of the three types of swords used by the Hengshan Sword School. Some had very blunt edges and a very sharp tip, which was the type of popular weapon used by some senior masters from the Songshan Sword School. There were also three swords that had the same length and weight of a regular Huashan style sword. More and more questions popped out in his head, “Why is there a pile of weapons from the Five Mountains Sword Alliance?”

Linghu Cong raised the torch high and looked around the walls of the cave. There was a big rock sticking out dozens of feet above the ground from the rock wall on the right side. It looked like a platform. Underneath the big rock, some words were carved onto the rock wall in large fonts, saying “THE FIVE MOUNTAINS SWORD ALLIANCE, YOU SHAMELESS AND DESPICABLE BUNCH, CAN’T WIN IN A FAIR FIGHT, DIRTY TRICKS ARE YOUR SPECIALTY.” There were a total of four lines of words and each character was about a foot tall. The strokes went inches into the rock. Obviously they were carved in with a very sharp blade. All the words were written in a bold and tense hand, with strokes extending in all directions. Then he noticed many smaller characters carved next to the huge characters with words like “dirty scoundrel”, “ignominious cowards”, “filthy pigs”, and “incompetent chickens” *etc.* All of them were cursing or swearing words.

The more Linghu Chong read, the angrier he became. “So all those people were prisoners of our Five Mountains Sword Alliance. They were all completely irritated, but had no other way of venting their anger, so had to carve those words onto the rock wall. I’d say what they did was the real shameless and despicable thing. But I wonder who would they be? If they were enemies of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, then they mustn’t be good.”

He looked at the rock wall again and saw a line of words that read, “Fan Song and Zhao He defeat Heng-Shan sword art here.” Right next to the text, there were many sketches of human forms drawn in pairs, one wielding a sword and the other wielding an axe. After a quick count, Linghu Chong estimated that there were at least five or six hundred of sketch drawings. Apparently the axe wielding one was countering the sword wielding one’s sword art forms. By the side of those human form drawings, there was another line of words saying, “Zhang Chengyun and Zhang Chengfeng defeat all Huashan sword art here.”

Linghu Chong was furious. “You shameless scoundrels, how wildly presumptuous you are! Huashan style sword art is meticulous and profound. There is very few in the world that can actually block it; who would have dared claiming to be able to not only “defeat”, but “defeat all” of the Huashan sword art?” he thought.

He picked up the heavy sword of the Taishan Sword School and smacked it hard against the line of text. With a loud bang and a shower of sparks, he smacked a part of the word “all” off. But from the smacking, he realized that the rock belonged to a very hard type, and even with sharp blades, it would still be very difficult to draw sketches or write on the rock wall.

He looked more closely and saw a drawing by the line of text. The sword wielding man were drawn with only a few simple and crude lines, but from the posture he could tell that it was one of the moves in the basic sword form of the Huashan sword art called Graceful Phoenix. In the move, the sword would be dancing with lithe and graceful movements. The countering human shape was wielding a straight line shaped weapon that could have been either a staff or a spear, with the tip of the weapon pointing directly at the swordsman’s sword tip, looking very clumsy.

Linghu Chong sneered. “The Graceful Phoenix move of Huashan has five additional hidden techniques. How could it ever be defeated by such a clumsy move?”

But when he looked at posture of the man in the drawing again, out of the dullness, there seemed to have more continuous flow in it. Although the move

Graceful Phoenix had five additional techniques, but the staff move seemed to faintly have six or seven additional techniques, more than enough to counter the various techniques from the Graceful Phoenix move.

His eyes fixing on the quick drawn human sketch, Linghu Chong was dumbfounded. “This Graceful Phoenix move of our sword school looks like an ordinary move, but the additional techniques hold great power. A smart opponent would have simply blocked it and dodged aside. If he had tried to counter it, he would be suffering great losses. But that staff move in the drawing really can defeat the Graceful Phoenix move of ours. That…that…that….” Gradually, his astonishment transformed into admiration. Deep in his heart, he also felt great terror.

He stared blankly at the two human sketches, lost in thought and time completely forgotten. Suddenly, a great pain came from his right hand and woke him. It turned out to be the torch, which had burned almost to the end and the flame caught his hand. He threw it down, thinking, “It’s going to be completely dark if the torch burns down.” So he rushed to the front cave, took over a dozen of the pine branches that were meant to be firewood for heating purposes, and then returned to the back cave in a dash.

He lit a pine stick from the about to extinguish torch and gazed at those two human shape sketches again, thinking, “If the staff wielding guy has the same level of Kung Fu as the swordsman from our sword school, then the swordsman might incur some serious injury. If the opponent has slightly better Kung Fu, then when the two moves clashes, the swordsman will see his own life perishing in front of his own eyes within the time of a flash. That Graceful Phoenix move of ours…has truly been defeated by the staff wielding man and has been rendered useless!”

He turned a little and started studying the second group of drawings and soon recognized that the swordsman was using a Huashan move called Green Pines Welcoming Guests. He immediately felt his spirits buoyed up. When he had learned that move in the old days, it had taken him a full month to be able to execute it proficiently. That move had become one of his favorite killer moves.

Feeling excited yet slightly frightened, fearing that this move might be defeated again, he looked at the staff wielding man drawing. But to his surprise, he saw five staffs in the man's hand striking toward five different parts of the swordsman's lower body.

"Why does he have five staffs?" he pondered.

After looking at the staff wielding man's posture some more he understood it. "These aren't five staffs. He is striking out five times quickly in one instant to hit five of the opponent's lower body. But if he's fast, I can be fast too. He might not be able to strike out five times fast enough. So this Green Pines Welcoming Guests can't be defeated after all."

Just when he was feeling great, he suddenly realized, "He is not striking out with his staff five times. He could have struck out in any one of the five positions, and how would I dodge that?"

He picked up one of the Huashan style sword and performed the move Green Pines Welcoming Guests. Then he studied the drawings carefully and imagined in his head how the opponent would have struck out with his staff. He figured that since he already knew where the staff would be striking to, he should be able to figure out a counter. But when that staff struck out from any one of the five positions, his sword would have been fully thrust out with no chance of withdrawing it back in time. Unless the thrust could kill the opponent, otherwise his lower body would for sure get hit. And the opponent most likely would be a skilled fighter, how could one expect to kill the opponent with one single thrust? And with the sliding posture and a lowered shoulder in the drawing, the enemy for sure would be able to dodge the thrust in that fraction of time. Once the enemy dodged the sword thrust and struck back, he would have no chance to evade. Thus, the unique Huashan move of Green Pines Welcoming Guests had been defeated as well.

Linghu Chong remembered that he had won three times in various fights using that move of Green Pines Welcoming Guests. If his opponents had seen the drawing on the rock wall before, and knew how to counter attack, then it wouldn't matter whether the opponent had used a staff or a spear, he would

have either get wounded or get killed. Probably there wouldn't even be a Linghu Chong left in the world today.

The more he thought about it, the more terrified he became. He murmured to himself as cold sweat streamed down his forehead, "That's impossible! That's impossible! If the move Green Pines Welcoming Guests could be defeated this way, how come Master knows nothing about it? Why didn't he ever warn me about it?" He knows all the key aspect of that move from inside out, so he knew to the full extent how detrimental those five staff strikes were. Although those were just five short lines on the rock wall, he could almost feel every strike smacking heavily onto his ankles and shins.

Linghu Chong looked on. The sword moves carved onto the rock wall were all unique moves of the Huashan Sword School, and the opponent always had ultra-clever and vicious moves that would defeat them. The more moves he checked out, the more he gasped, until a move called Boundless Falling Leaves. The enemy's staff move against this one appeared to be very weak and powerless. The entire counter move had taken the defending initiative. Linghu Chong heaved a long sigh of relieve, thinking, "There's finally one you can't defeat!"

He remembered a scene in January last year. It snowed that day. Countless of snowflakes swirled in the air. Master was in a very good mood. He gathered the apprentices for a sword art lesson. At the end of the lesson, he demonstrated the move Boundless Falling Leaves. His every thrust became even faster than the previous one and every thrust hit a swirling snowflake in the air. Even Master-Wife applauded and cheered, saying, "Apprentice brother, I am convinced from this move that you are qualified to be the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School." Master answered with a smile, "It takes moral integrity, not shear power to lead the Huashan Sword School. It's not necessary that with just one proficient move, someone would become qualified for the post of Head Master." Master-Wife rebuffed in a grin, "Hey, aren't you ashamed? What moral integrity of yours is better than mine?" Master smiled and did not argue. Master-Wife seldom submitted to other's Kung Fu and loved to compete with Master. Even

she had to admit her admiration that time, so it was obvious that the move Boundless Falling Leaves was a superior move. Master explained about the move later. The name of the move came from a poem and the poem had a line saying something like "boundless falling leaves". Master had recited it at the time, but Linghu Chong couldn't remember it. It seemed to be describing how leaves from thousands of trees had fallen and swirled in the air in all directions. That was why this sword move needed to cover all directions.

Looking at the staff wielding human sketch, he found a human shape drawing huddled himself up in a rather unsightly posture that looked as if he had no way of avoiding a good beating. Linghu Chong was about to laugh out loud when his smile suddenly froze. He felt a chill run down his back and the fine hairs on his back almost all stood up. He gazed at the staff in the man's hand on the sketch without blinking. The more he gazed at it, the more he felt that the staff was at an ingenious position. All the nine thrusts, ten thrusts, eleven thrusts, or twelve thrusts…out of the move Boundless Falling Leaves would inevitably land on the staff. The position of the staff appeared to be dull when one first looked at it, but was actually very clever; the staff move appeared to be very weak, yet it was actually extremely strong. The move really had attained the lofty realm of martial arts that is to "counter motion with standstill and defy cleverness with dullness."

Instantaneously, he had lost all his confidence in the Kung Fu of his own sword school. All he could think of was that even if he could perfect his sword art so it was as good as his Master's, when he encountered the man with the staff, he would still stand no chance of possibly defending himself. In that case, what good would it do for him to continue learning this style of sword art?

"Is Huashan style sword art really so fragile that it wouldn't even withstand a single blow? Those skeletons must have been decaying in the cave for at least thirty or forty years. How could the Five Mountains Sword Alliance still be dominating the Martial World since then, and no one had ever mentioned that the sword art of any one of the five sword schools could be defeated? Are those drawings just idling theories? Well, it doesn't seem so."

Although he couldn't tell if the sword arts of the Songshan Sword School and the rest members of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance were truly defeated, he knew Huashan style sword art from inside out, and he knew too well that if he had encountered such brilliant moves in a real fight all of a sudden, he would undoubtedly be suffering a crushing defeat.

He stood still, seized in terror, almost as if someone had sealed his acupoints. Endless of thoughts flashed by his mind, and he totally forgot about time.

Time went by, and finally, someone's voice rose. "Big apprentice brother, big apprentice brother, where are you?"

Stunned, Linghu Chong immediately turned and ran through the narrow pathway until he passed through the hole on the rock wall and got back into his own cave compartment. It was Lu Dayou calling out around the cliff. Linghu Chong leapt out of the cave and turned behind a big rock at the back of the cliff. After sitting down cross-legged, he called out, "I am here meditating. Sixth apprentice brother, what's the matter?"

Lu Dayou followed the direction of the sound and came by. "Big apprentice brother! Here you are! I've brought your dinner up for you," he said happily.

Ever since Linghu Chong started studying the moves on the rock wall before dawn, he had totally lost track of time because of his focus on the drawings. It was already in the late afternoon by now. The cave he lived in was specifically used for meditation and contemplation, so Lu Dayou dared not to enter without permission. The cave was a shallow one. Since he didn't see Linghu Chong inside the cave, he started looking around the cliff.

Linghu Chong noticed that Lu Dayou's right cheek was covered with a layer of herbal medicine, with blood still oozing out of the green dressing. Evidently, he was wounded pretty badly. So he asked hurriedly, "Hey, what happened to your face?"

"This morning when I was practicing sword art, I accidentally cut myself. How stupid was I!" Lu Dayou answered.

Seeing more irritation than embarrassment in Lu Dayou's eyes, Linghu Chong

figured that there must be something else. “Sixth apprentice brother, how did you really get hurt? Can’t I be trusted with the truth?” he asked.

“Big apprentice brother, I don’t want to hide the truth from you. I didn’t say the truth because I am just afraid that you might get mad,” Lu Dayou growled.

“So who cut you?” Linghu Chong inquired. He felt quite surprised. Apprentice brothers in Huashan Sword School had always been getting along comfortably well, and had never got into any fights among each other. Did outside enemies come to Huashan to cause trouble?

Lu Dayou explained. “This morning I sparred with junior apprentice brother Lin. He just learned that move Graceful Phoenix. I wasn’t paying enough attention and got a cut on my face.”

“It’s normal for somebody to make a mistake occasionally when apprentice brothers spar each other. Don’t get mad. Apprentice brother Lin probably just learned that move recently and couldn’t control the move too well. You can’t really blame him. But you probably were a bit too careless. That move Graceful Phoenix is a powerful one. You should have treated it more carefully,” Linghu Chong said.

“That’s right. But how would I know that…that chap Lin have learned the Graceful Phoenix after only several months of apprenticeship? It was after my fifth year in Huashan that Master finally permitted you to teach me that move,” Lu Dayou grumbled.

Linghu Chong was slightly surprised. He thought to himself, “Apprentice brother Lin has only been in Huashan Sword School for several months, and now he has already learned the move Graceful Phoenix. He has progressed too fast. If he didn’t have the brain of a super smart genius, then he wouldn’t have a good foundation. To progress this fast is actually detrimental for his later progress. Why did Master teach him this move so early?”

Lu Dayou continued, “When I saw it all of a sudden, I was shocked, that’s how I got cut by him. Little apprentice sister applauded and cheered by the side. She said, ‘Monkey Six, you can’t even beat my student. How are you going to

pose as a hero in front me again?' That chap Lin knew he was wrong and tried to come by and bind up the wound for me, but I kicked him to the ground. Little apprentice sister snapped, 'Monkey Six, he is trying to be nice to bind up your wound. Are you shamed into anger because you can't beat him?' Big apprentice brother, it turned out that little apprentice sister secretly taught him that move."

Instantly, Linghu Chong's heart was filled with strong grief. That Graceful Phoenix move was a very difficult one. The five additional techniques had complicated variations, and on top of that, the practitioner also needed to memorize a lot of formulas that went with the techniques. In order to help apprentice brother Lin understand that move, little apprentice sister must have racked her brain out and put in a lot of work. So the reason why she didn't come up the cliff all those days is because she spent the entire time with apprentice brother Lin. Yue Lingshan was the impatient type. She always had a hard time staying still and hated tasks that would require meticulous cares. She always wanted to be better than others. That was why she was able to gather enough patience when she was learning sword arts herself. But if she were teaching someone else, she would never have taught carefully. But now she actually taught that complicated move Graceful Phoenix to Lin Pingzhi. It wouldn't be hard to imagine how much she cared about this junior apprentice brother of hers. Only after a while did he finally managed to calm down.

"Why did you go sparring with apprentice brother Lin?" he asked dryly.

"Yesterday when I said those words to you, little apprentice sister wasn't very happy about it and croaked at me all the way down the cliff. Then early this morning, she dragged me to go sparring with apprentice brother Lin. I didn't think too much about it and thought that it was just a practice. But who would have expected that little apprentice sister secretly taught several unique moves to the chap Lin. I was caught totally off guard and became a prey of their plot."

Linghu Chong understood now: When Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi got into an intimate relationship in those past days, since Lu Dayou was very close to me, he couldn't take it anymore, so he must have spilled out many satirical

comments. Linghu Chong wouldn't be surprised if Lu Dayou had even made trouble and swore at Lin Pingzhi. So he asked.

"You've swore at apprentice brother Lin several times already, haven't you?"

"That dirty shameless sissy. Of course I'd be swearing at him. He got scared of me. Every time I swore at him, he dared not swear back at me and always turned away immediately to avoid me. But I would never have thought…thought that this chap is so vicious. Humph! He can't get anywhere by himself. If it weren't because little apprentice sister was behind him, how could he have wounded me?" Lu Dayou grunted.

Linghu Chong couldn't help but feel a kind of indescribable bitterness in his heart. He suddenly remember the move drawn on the rock wall in the back cave that was created to defeat the move Graceful Phoenix, so he picked up a branch from the ground and was ready to teach that move to Lu Dayou, but then he thought better of it.

"Sixth apprentice brother hates that chap Lin so much right now, once he uses this move, he would almost certainly wound Lin Pingzhi severely. Then when Master and Master-Wife look into the incident, the two of us would be severely punished for sure! I can't do that!" At that thought, he said, "Well, a fall to the pit, a gain in your wit. Just don't get tricked again next time. We are all apprentice brothers. A small loss in a spar practice is really nothing. Why don't you take it easy?"

"Sure. But big apprentice brother, I can take it easy. Can you…you take it easy, too?" Lu Dayou rebuffed.

Linghu Chong knew that he meant Yue Lingshan. A great pain came from his heart, and even his face twitched because of the pain.

"Sorry, I…I shouldn't have said that." As soon as the words came out, Lu Dayou realized how much damage he has done, so he immediately regretted it.

Linghu Chong held tight Lu Dayou's hands and said slowly, "You said it right. How can I not care? But…but…." After a long pause, he said, "Sixth apprentice brother, let's not talk about this anymore."

“Sure!” Lu Dayou replied. “Big apprentice brother, you have taught me that move Graceful Phoenix before. I just didn’t pay enough attention and fell into that chap’s trap. I’ll practice more dedicatedly with all my heart. I have to let that chap know who’s better, the one taught by big apprentice brother or the one taught by little apprentice sister.”

Linghu Chong let out a sad smile. “The move Graceful Phoenix, alas, it really is nothing,” he said.

Lu Dayou could see the sad expression on Linghu Chong’s face. He figured that Linghu Chong only got so disheartened because little apprentice sister started to treat him coldly, so he dared not to say another word. After the two finished the meal, Lu Dayou cleared away the bowls and chopsticks and then left.

After a slight rest, Linghu Chong lit a torch and went back to the back cave to study those sword art drawings on the rock wall again. At the beginning, all he could think of was still how Yue Lingshan taught Lin Pingzhi sword arts, so he simply could not concentrate on the drawings on the rock wall. All the human forms in simple sketches seemed to have transformed into Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi, one teaching, the other learning, in a very affectionate way. And no matter which direction he looked at, he could always see the handsome face of Lin Pingzhi flashing in front of his eyes again and again. He heaved a long sigh, thinking, “Apprentice brother Lin is ten times more handsome than I am, and he is much younger than me, only one or two years older than little apprentice sister. Of course it is natural for the two to become close.”

Suddenly, a drawing on the rock wall caught his attention. The swordsman in the drawing thrust his sword out, and the way he thrust the sword out and the route of the sword greatly resembled the move of Madam Yue’s – Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning. Linghu Chong was astounded. He thought, “This move of Master-Wife clearly was created by her. How come it was carved on the rock wall way ahead of time? How could this have happened?”

He looked at the drawing more closely and then found out that the thrust drawn on the rock wall and the move created by Madam Yue were actually quite

different. The sword move on the rock wall was bold and vigorous, simple and unadorned, apparently executed by a man. Once the thrust was out, there was only one thrust, not like how Madam Yue's move had all those extra hidden techniques. But because it was simpler, it was also more swift and fierce. Linghu Chong nodded as he thought to himself, "It's actually not surprising at all. The sword move created by Master-Wife used an idea that matched with earlier people's idea. Since both moves came from the basic theory of the Huashan style sword arts, and the two creators had about the same level of Kung Fu and comprehension, of course the creations would have been alike with only minor differences." Then he realized, "In that case, even Master and Master-Wife didn't know many of the sword moves drawn here. Didn't Master learn the entire set of the advanced sword arts of our Huashan Sword School?" The opponent's staff also thrust out straight with the staff tip aiming right at the sword tip. The staff and the sword made a perfect straight line.

Seeing the straight line made, Linghu Chong cried out loud, "Oh, no!" The torch in his hand fell down to the floor and the cave was instantly covered by complete darkness. He was completely taken by terror and could only murmur, "What do I do? What do I do?"

He could see clearly that since the staff and the sword were in a tit-for-tat fight, and the staff is rigid and solid while the sword being flexible, when the two fighters both thrust out with all their strength, the long sword would have no choice but to break from the middle. In this move, both fighters would have continuous energy flow going together with the thrust, and the staff would be taking the advantage of the situation and keep going forward while the energy on the sword would come right back to haunt the swordsman. There was really no way out of it.

A thought suddenly flashed by his mind, "Is there really no way out of it? I guess not. After the sword breaks in half, and when the opponent's staff jabs by, the swordsman can either drop the broken sword, kneel down with both legs, or he can dive forward to avoid the strike from the staff. But Master and Master-Wife are both well-known sword masters in the Martial World, how could they

even consider using such body positions? They would rather die than take on such humiliation. Alas, what a crushing defeat! What a devastating defeat!"

He stood there silently for a good while, and then finally took out the flint stone and lit the torch again. He continued studying the rock wall and saw that the sword moves were getting more and more exquisite and intriguing, especially the last dozens of moves simply fluctuated unpredictably and appeared to be mysterious and profound. But no matter how brilliant each sword move was the opponent's staff would always have an effective way to counter it. At the end of the Huashan sword move drawings, pictures of the swordsman kneeling on the floor in front of the staff wielding man, heading down, sword being thrown away, were carved on the rock wall. Feelings of anger and rage had slipped away from Linghu Chong's mind long ago. All there was left was the deep feeling of despair. Although the picture was totally arrogant and harsh, there was no doubt that Huashan style sword art had been completely defeated by him, and the swordsman would never be able to compete with him. It was sadly so very true.

That night, he wandered around the back cave back and forth for countless of circles. He had never been hit with such a devastating strike before in his entire life. He kept thinking, "Huashan Sword School is a member of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. It is a world-renowned big sword school with great fame in the Martial World. But the Kung Fu of our sword school is actually so pathetic. Among those sword moves drawn on the rock wall, there were at least over a hundred moves that even Master and Master-Wife didn't know about. Even if I could master the entire most advanced sword moves of the Huashan Sword School, and become way better than my Master, what difference would it make? As long as the opponent knew about the counter moves, even the best and toughest swordsman of Huashan Sword School would still have to throw down his sword and surrender. If he didn't want to surrender, then the only other choice was to commit suicide."

He paced up and down, feeling deeply vexed and frustrated. The torch had extinguished a while back. He lit the torch again. Staring at the kneeling and

surrendering human shape sketch, he felt more and more annoyed. Raising his sword high, he wanted to chop at the picture, but right before the tip of the sword touched the rock wall, he held it back, thinking, "A true man is open and aboveboard. A win stays a win and a loss stays a loss. Our Huashan Sword School truly has inferior Kung Fu skills. We really have no excuses." He threw down his sword with a deep sigh.

He went ahead and looked at some other drawings on the rock wall, and not to his surprise, the sword moves of Songshan, Hengshan, Taishan, and Heng-Shan Sword Schools were also completely defeated, and the swordsman sketch always ended up kneeling down to surrender. Linghu Chong had been in Huashan Sword School for a long time and had a good amount of knowledge about many other sword schools. Although he didn't know the key aspects of the other four member sword schools' sword moves, he had at least heard about the basic ideas behind them. Every one of the sword moves from the other four member sword schools drawn on the rock wall was truly magnificent, but still, the man in the drawing defeated every one of them.

In his heart, other than terror, some unanswered questions also troubled him. "Fan Song, Zhao He, Zhang Chengfeng, Zhang Chengyun. Who are these people? Where did they come from? Why did they work so hard to carve on the rock wall all those moves that can defeat our Five Mountains Sword Alliance's sword arts, yet they themselves were so unknown to the Martial World? And how could our Five Mountains Sword Alliance have still maintained such a great fame today?" He faintly felt that the Five Mountains Sword Alliance had been enjoying a quite undeserved and deceiving fame in the Martial World today, or they were just too fortunate. The thousands of masters and apprentices in the five sword schools were only able to survive in the Martial World because luckily the drawings on the rock wall were unknown to the public.

A thought suddenly popped into his mind, "Why don't I use that sharp axe to chop all those drawings down and leave no trace of it whatsoever, so it would be as if those counter moves had never even existed in the world? Then, for sure, the fame of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance would be saved. I'll just

pretend that I've never found this back cave. That's all."

He went in to the narrow pathway, picked up the axe, and came back by the rock wall. But after staring at those exquisite and brilliant moves for a good while, he simply could not raise the axe to chop at the drawings. He stood there and pondered upon the decision back and forth. Finally, he said to himself loudly, "I, Linghu Chong, will never do such shameless and undignified things!"

All of a sudden, he remembered about the masked man in green robe. "That man has such excellent sword skills. He probably had something to do with the drawings in the cave. Who is he? Who is he?"

He stepped back to the front cave and pondered upon the question for half a day, then went back again to the back cave to study the drawings on the rock wall. He went back and forth between the front and the back cave until it was getting late in the day.

Sounds of footsteps came, and it was Yue Lingshan who came with the meal basket in her hand. Linghu Chong was overjoyed. He rushed by the edge of the cliff to greet. "Little apprentice sister!" His voice trembled from joy.

Yue Lingshan didn't answer. She climbed up the cliff and threw the meal basket on to the big rock heavily. Without even looking at Linghu Chong, she turned around and started walking away.

"Little apprentice sister, little apprentice sister, what's the matter?" Linghu Chong called out in despair.

Yue Lingshan gave a snort and then leapt off the cliff onto the path going back. And no matter how Linghu Chong called her again and again, she never answered or even looked back.

With thoughts surging through his mind, Linghu Chong didn't know what to do. He opened the meal basket and found one bowl of rice and two bowls of vegetarian dishes, without the small calabash of wine. He stared at them blankly, lost in thought. For several times he had wanted to start eating, but each time after the first bite, he would feel bitterness in his mouth and totally lose his appetite. He finally gave up, thinking, "If little apprentice sister is mad at me,

why did she bring the food up for me herself? If she is not mad at me, why didn't she say a word and didn't even cast a glance at me? Is sixth apprentice brother sick so she had to bring food up? But if sixth apprentice brother can't bring food up, fifth, seventh, eighth apprentice brothers or any other person can do it. Why did little apprentice sister come by herself?" He pondered hard upon the question and completely forgot about the sword moves on the rock wall in the back cave.

At dusk the next day, Yue Lingshan brought food up again. As same as the day before, she didn't look at Linghu Chong or say anything to him at all. On her way down the cliff, she even started singing Fujian folk songs loudly. Linghu Chong felt like someone was stabbing him hard in the heart. He thought to himself, "So she came to annoy me intentionally."

At dusk the day after, again, Yue Lingshan threw the meal basket on the big rock and immediately turned around and left. Linghu Chong could not hold it any longer and called out, "Little apprentice sister, please stop. I need to talk to you."

"Speak out, please." Yue Lingshan turned around. Her face looked as if it was covered by a layer of frost. There was no trace of a smile at all.

"You…you…you…." Seeing the expression on Yue Lingshan's face, Linghu Chong stammered.

"What about me?" Yue Lingshan demanded.

"I…I…." On normal days, he was the unrestrained and unconventional type, and would have been clever and fluent, but now he was completely lost in words.

"If you don't have anything to say, I am leaving," Yue Lingshan said as she turned around to leave.

Linghu Chong was greatly worried, thinking that once she had left, she wouldn't be back until dusk the next day, and if he couldn't get an answer out of her today, how could he ever endure the anxiety for another night? And judging from the look on her face, maybe she wouldn't even come the next day, and it

wouldn't be surprising that she might not come for an entire month. In the moment of desperation, he reached out and grabbed onto her left sleeve.

"Let go of me!" Yue Lingshan snapped, as she pulled back hard. With a tearing sound, the sleeve was tore off completely and half of her left shoulder was exposed. Greatly nettled and embarrassed, Yue Lingshan didn't even know how to place her exposed shoulder and arm. As a martial arts student, Yue Lingshan didn't bother with small matters as much as an average girl, but when a potion of her shoulder and her arm suddenly became exposed, she found herself in a very awkward position.

"How…how dare you!" she yelled.

"Little apprentice sister, sor…sorry, I…I didn't mean to do that." Linghu Chong explained hurriedly.

Yue Lingshan placed her right sleeve on her left shoulder to cover it up. "What exactly are you trying to say?" she ranted.

"I just don't understand," Linghu Chong said, "why are you treating me like this? If I really somehow offended you, little apprentice sister, you…you…can just draw your sword and stab me a dozen times or something, and I'll die with no grievance."

"You are the big apprentice brother, how dare us to offend you, not mentioning stabbing you a dozen times?" Yue Lingshan sneered. "We are your junior apprentice brother and sister. As long as you don't discipline us with punishment, we'd be thanking Heavens already."

"I've been thinking very hard, but I still can't figure out how I offended my apprentice sister," Linghu Chong said.

"You can't figure it out? Didn't you figure out how to have Monkey Six complain to Dad and Mom?" Yue Lingshan said furiously.

"I had Monkey Six complain to Master and Master-Wife? Complain… complain about you?" Linghu Chong asked in great surprise.

"You knew Dad and Mom love me dearly and it would be useless to complain

about me. How clever of you to complain about…complain about…humph! Why are you still pretending? Don't you know what you did?"

It only took Linghu Chong an instant to guess what really happened, but that only brought more bitterness. "Master and Master-Wife found out about Lu Dayou's wound from his sparring with apprentice brother Lin and punished apprentice brother Lin, didn't they?" he asked, but in his heart, he thought, "Because Master and Master-Wife punished apprentice brother Lin, you actually become this mad at me?"

"It was only an accident in a sword spar between apprentice brothers. He didn't do it intentionally. But Dad sided with Monkey Six and gave Little Lin a good scolding, saying that Little Lin didn't have enough skills and shouldn't have learned the kind of moves like Graceful Phoenix. He banned me from teaching him sword skills. Fine, you won! But…but…I…I'll never pay attention to you again! Never ever ever!"

The phrase "never ever ever" was something Yue Lingshan used quite often when she joked with Linghu Chong in normal days. When she had said it before, she would always be casting a sideway glance at him with a big grin on her face. But this time she looked so serious and sincere, and from the way she said it, it seemed as if she really was determined to end her relationship with him.

Linghu Chong took a step forward and said, "Little apprentice sister, I…." He had wanted to say, "I really didn't ask sixth apprentice brother to complain to Master and Master-Wife." But then he thought, "I didn't do it. I have a clear conscience. Why should I beg pity from you?" So after the word "I", he stopped abruptly.

"You what?" Yue Lingshan asked.

"I nothing." Linghu Chong shook his head. "I just thought, even though Master and Master-Wife banned you from teaching apprentice brother Lin sword arts, that's nothing major, why did you get so mad at me?"

Yue Lingshan blushed. "I am mad at you! I am mad at you! You've got ill will

in your heart. You figured that since I can't teach apprentice brother Lin sword arts anymore, I would be your company everyday. Humph, I'll never pay attention to you again! Never ever ever!" She stomped her foot on the ground heavily and then stormed off.

This time Linghu Chong dared not to pull her clothes again. With a stomach full of grievance and bitterness, he heard her loud and clear singing the Fujian folk song again. He walked to the edge of the cliff and looked down, only seeing her slim receding figure turning around the shoulder of the peak. Vaguely, he could see her left arm and shoulder still covered by her right sleeve. He became worried.

"I tore her sleeve off. If she runs to Master and Master-Wife to complain, the respectful Master and Master-Wife might think that I was taking liberties with her, then…then…what's going to happen? If this gets spread around, even the bunch of apprentice brothers and sisters would look down on me."

But then he reconsidered, "I wasn't taking liberties with her. What do I care how others would think of it?" But when he thought that she got so mad at him just because she couldn't teach Lin Pingzhi sword skills anymore, he couldn't help but feel great sorrow.

At the beginning, he was still able to comfort himself by thinking, "Little apprentice sister is young and playful. Since I am meditating on the cliff, and there is no one else who would chat with her and play with her, she just wanted apprentice brother Lin, who happened to be about the same age as her, to be her companion. She doesn't have any other thoughts." But then after reconsideration, he thought, "I grew up together with her. That's a much deeper relationship and affection. Apprentice brother Lin has only been on Mount Huashan for several months, but she has treated us so differently, so out of ordinance." At that thought, he felt even more bitterness.

That night, he paced up and down, from the cave to the edge of the cliff, then back from the edge of the cliff to the cave, again and again, for thousands of times, and the same the next day. All he could think of was Yue Lingshan. The drawings on the rock wall in the back cave and that man in the green robe who

showed up that night were all completely forgotten from his mind.

At dusk, it was Lu Dayou who brought the food up. He set the food on the rock and filled the bowls with rice. “Big apprentice brother, let’s eat,” he said.

Linghu Chong merely answered a slight snort as he picked up the bowl and the chopsticks. He placed some food in his mouth but had no appetite whatsoever. After casting a glance down the cliff, he slowly set down his bowl.

“Big apprentice brother, you don’t look too good. Are you feeling alright?” Lu Dayou asked.

“It’s nothing.” Linghu Chong shook his head.

“I picked those mushrooms for you yesterday. Have some and see how they taste?” Lu Dayou suggested.

Not having the heart to go against Lu Dayou’s good will, Linghu Chong ate two mushrooms. “Very good,” he said. Actually, the mushrooms were quite tasty, but he didn’t even notice.

“Big apprentice brother, I’ve got good news for you!” Lu Dayou said with a grin. “Starting from yesterday, Master and Master-Wife banned Little Lin from learning sword arts with little apprentice sister.”

“You couldn’t beat apprentice brother Lin in a sword fight, that’s why you complained to Master and Master-Wife, didn’t you?” Linghu Chong said coldly.

Lu Dayou jumped onto his feet. “Who said that I couldn’t beat him? I…I was doing it for….” He suddenly stopped.

Linghu Chong knew very well that even though Lin Pingzhi wounded Lu Dayou with a move of Graceful Phoenix by surprise, Lu Dayou still had been in the school much longer, and Lin Pingzhi would be no match for him. The reason he complained to Master and Master-Wife was really for Linghu Chong’s sake. He suddenly came upon a thought, “So all the apprentice brothers and sisters were pitying me in their hearts. They all know that little apprentice sister is breaking up with me. Only because sixth apprentice brother is close to me, he managed to do something about it. Humph, a true man does not need pity from

others!”

All of a sudden, he jumped up like a mad man. Picking up the bowls and the plates, he threw them off the cliff one by one, shouting, “Who asked you to poke around? Who asked you to poke around?”

Lu Dayou was shocked. He had always respected and admired the big apprentice brother, and had no idea that Linghu Chong would be provoked into such an outrage. Flurried, he kept stepping back, murmuring, “Big apprentice brother, big…apprentice brother.”

After throwing all the bowls and dishes into the deep valley, Linghu Chong didn’t feel any better, so he randomly picked up one rock after another and kept throwing them into the deep valley.

“Big apprentice brother, it’s my fault. Why…why don’t you give me a beating,” Lu Dayou said.

Linghu Chong was just about to throw a rock when he heard Lu Dayou’s words. He turned around and asked in a stern voice, “Why is it your fault?”

Lu Dayou took another step back in fear and murmured, “I…I…I don’t know!”

Linghu Chong heaved a deep sigh. He threw the rock in his hand far away and then grabbed Lu Dayou’s hands. “Sixth apprentice brother, I am sorry. I am just depressed myself. It has nothing to do with you.”

Lu Dayou let out a breath of relief. “Let me get down and bring up some food again,” he suggested.

“No, don’t bother. I don’t feel like eating.” Linghu Chong shook his head.

Seeing the food in yesterday’s meal basket still untouched, Lu Dayou became worried. “Big apprentice brother, you didn’t eat yesterday either, did you?” he asked.

“Don’t worry about it. I just don’t have good appetites these days.” Linghu Chong forced out a smile.

Lu Dayou dared not to argue, but the next day when it was still early in the afternoon, he had already brought food up the cliff. He thought, “I’ve managed to get a big calabash of good wine today together with two delicious dishes. I’ll have to get big apprentice brother to eat some more.” But after he climbed up the cliff, he found Linghu Chong sleeping on the rock in the cave, looking very wan and sallow.

“Big apprentice brother, see what this is?” Slightly shocked, he said, as he swayed the wine-calabash in front of Linghu Chong. After he opened the lid, the entire cave was soon filled with the wonderful scent of wine.

Linghu Chong took the calabash and drank half of the wine in just one breath. “The wine is not bad!” he praised.

“Let me fill your bowl with rice,” Lu Dayou said happily.

“Nah. I don’t feel like eating.” Linghu Chong objected.

“How about just one bowl?” Lu Dayou suggested, as he filled the bowl full with rice.

Not having the heart to go against Lu Dayou’s good will, Linghu Chong had to agree. “Ok, I will eat it after I finish drinking.”

But Linghu Chong didn’t eat the bowl of rice after all. The next day when Lu Dayou brought food up again, he found the bowl of rice sitting on the rock untouched and Linghu Chong sleeping on the floor. Lu Dayou noticed some redness on Linghu Chong’s cheeks, so he reached out and felt Linghu Chong’s forehead with his hand. It was burning hot. Linghu Chong must be running a high fever. He became very worried.

“Big apprentice brother, are you feeling sick?” he asked gently.

“Wine, wine! Give me wine!” Linghu Chong mumbled.

Although Lu Dayou brought some wine with him, he didn’t give it to him. Instead, he poured a bowl of water and sent it next to Linghu Chong’s lips.

Linghu Chong sat up and drank the big bowl of water in one swallow. “Good wine, great wine!” he yelled, and then fell down on his back heavily, still

mumbling, “Good wine! Great Wine!”

Knowing that Linghu Chong’s illness was quite serious, Lu Dayou was very concerned, but it happened that Master and Master-Wife had some business to take care of and had left Mount Huashan early in the morning. So he ran down the cliff and told Lao Denuo and the other senior apprentice brothers.

Yue Buqun had set up a strict rule that other than the once a day task of bringing food up the cliff, no one would be allowed to go up the cliff to see Linghu Chong. But now since he was seriously ill, to go up the cliff to check on him probably wouldn’t be counted as a violation. Yet the bunch of apprentices still dared not to go up the cliff all at once and decided to go up the cliff to check on Linghu Chong in groups and in different days. Lao Denuo and Liang Fa were the first two to go up.

Lu Dayou then went and told Yue Lingshan about it. Yue Lingshan was still quite angry at Linghu Chong, so she said coldly, “Come on, big apprentice brother has excellent inner energy, how could he become ill? You can’t fool me.”

The illness of Linghu Chong broke with such a tremendous force. For four days and four nights, Linghu Chong stayed in a coma. Lu Dayou begged Yue Lingshan to go up the cliff to pay a visit. He almost knelt down in front of her when she finally realized he was speaking the truth and also got greatly worried. She went up the cliff together with Lu Dayou, only finding a Linghu Chong with deeply sank cheeks and disheveled beard all over his face, nothing even close to the unrestrained and unconventional one he used to be.

With remorse in her heart, Yue Lingshan walked by his side and said gently, “Big apprentice brother, I’ve come to see you. Don’t be mad at me any more, alright?”

Linghu Chong’s face looked indifferent. His eyes wide open, he stared at her with a confused look, as if he didn’t know who she was at all.

“Big apprentice brother, it’s me. Why don’t you answer me?” Yue Lingshan said.

Linghu Chong kept staring at her blankly. After a while, he closed his eyes and fell asleep. Till Lu Dayou and Yue Lingshan had left, he still did not wake up.

Only after well over a month, Linghu Chong finally started to recover. During the one month, Yue Lingshan had come to visit him a total of three times. The second time she came, Linghu Chong had already regained his consciousness and was very happy to see her. The third time she came, Linghu Chong had already been able to sit up to eat a couple of the cookies she brought with her. But after that visit, she stopped coming. After Linghu Chong was able to stand up and walk around, he would be waiting by the edge of the cliff most of the day for little apprentice sister's pretty figure to show up, but every time all he could see was either the quiet and empty valley, or the sight of Lu Dayou bending his back to climb up the cliff in a hurry.

Chapter 9: Invitation

Translated by Lanny Lin



Linghu Chong's hand happened to come upon the sheath by his waist, without thinking, he pointed the sheath at Mrs. Yue's long sword in a straight line. "Clank," Mrs. Yue's long sword snapped into the sheath perfectly.

At dusk one day, Linghu Chong looked down from the cliff as usual and saw two figures coming toward the cliff in great speed. The one in front was in a skirt and obviously was a woman. Both of them had excellent Qing-Gong[55] skills. To them, the steep slope and precipices were just like leveled ground.

Linghu Chong stared some more and then realized that they were actually none other than Master and Master-Wife.

“Master, Master-Wife!” in great joy, he called out loudly.

Only a few moments later, Yue Buqun and Madam Yue leapt onto the cliff. Madam Yue had a meal basket in her hand. According to generations of traditional Huashan Sword School rules, when someone was being punished to meditate on the “Cliff of Contemplation,” other than bringing food to him, none of his apprentice brothers would be allowed to come up the cliff to chat with him. Even the apprentice student of the one being punished would be restricted from coming up to pay his respect to his Master. Who would have thought that the Yue Buqun couple actually came up the cliff themselves?

Unable to hide his shear joy, Linghu Chong rushed forward and knelt down, embracing Yue Buqun’s legs into his arms.

“Master, Master-Wife, I missed you so much!” he cried out.

Yue Buqun’s eyebrows knitted into a straight line. He always knew that this top apprentice of his was forthright and sincere with his feelings and was never strong at self-discipline, which was exactly the major barrier for studying advanced Huashan style Qi-Gong.[56] Before the Yue couple came up the cliff, they had already inquired about the cause of his illness. Although none of the apprentices had a straightforward answer, from the combined information from everybody’s words, they had already figured out that it must have something to do with Yue Lingshan. After checking in details with their daughter and only getting hums and haws as her answer, they came to the same conclusion. Now seeing the revelation of Linghu Chong’s true feelings, Yue Buqun could tell that apparently in the last half a year, Linghu Chong had not progressed at all during his stay on the “Cliff of Contemplation”. Feeling somewhat displeased, he let out a snort.

Madam Yue reached out and propped Linghu Chong up. Seeing Linghu Chong’s thin and pallid face, so different from the face that had glowed with health and radiated vigor on normal days, she couldn’t help but pity him.

“Chong, your Master and I just got back from the far northeast and heard that you have been quite ill. Have you recovered yet?” she asked in a soft tone.

“I am all recovered now.” Linghu Chong felt a stream of warmth coursing through his body and teardrops starting to emerge in his eyes. “Master, Master-Wife, you two must have had a tiring journey, and as soon as you got back today, you are already coming up…coming up to see me.” In great excitement, he choked with sobs and turned his head away to wipe off his tears.

Madam Yue took out a bowl of ginseng soup from the meal basket. “The soup is made with stewed wild ginsengs from the far northeast. It will be very good nourishment for you. Go ahead and drink some,” she said.

Realizing that Master and Master-Wife had carried the ginsengs over a very long distance from the far northeast and had thought of letting him take it before everyone else, he was so grateful that when he took the soup from Master-Wife, his hand trembled slightly and spilled a little of the ginseng soup. Madam Yue reached for the bowl so she could feed him, but Linghu Chong quickly finished the soup in big swallows.

“Many thanks, Master and Master-Wife!” he uttered.

Yue Buqun stretched his arm out and placed his finger on Linghu Chong’s wrist to check on his pulse, but his pulse was slick and speedy, which could only mean that Linghu Chong’s inner energy level actually slipped back quite a bit. Yue Buqun was even more displeased, but he only said dryly, “Yeah, he has recovered.”

After a short while, Yue Buqun asked, “Chong, what did you do during the several months you spent on the ‘Cliff of Contemplation?’ How come your inner energy level not only did not progress, and quite on the contrary, has slipped a lot?”

“Master and Master-Wife, please pardon me!” Linghu Chong said, bowing his head down.

“Chong had fallen ill. He hasn’t fully recovered yet. Of course his inner energy would suffer. Do you actually expect the more severely he had fallen ill, the

better his Kung Fu would have become?"

Yue Buqun shook his head and explained, "I wasn't talking about if he's healthy or not. I am talking about his mastery of inner energy, which has nothing to do with whether he falls ill or not. Our school's Qi-Gong is quite different from other schools. As long as one keeps practicing it with devotion, he can progress even in his sleeps, let along the fact that Chong has been practicing our school's Qi-Gong for over ten years. He shouldn't have gotten sick unless he has incurred external wounds. In short…in short, it would still attribute to his not being able to control his emotions and desires."

Madam Yue knew her husband was right, so she said to Linghu Chong, "Chong, your Master has repeatedly advised you to practice Qi-Gong and sword arts diligently. He punished you to meditate on top of the 'Cliff of the Contemplation,' but it isn't really a punishment. He just wished that without any outside interference, your Qi-Gong and your sword skills would advance by leaps and bounds within the one-year period. Who would have thought… thought…alas…!"

Linghu Chong felt very embarrassed. "I am sorry. I realize my mistake now. I will practice with all my heart starting from today," he said with his head down.

Yue Buqun spoke again. "There have been more and more turmoil in the Martial World these days. During the last several years, your Master-Wife and I went on many journeys and tried to smooth things up, but the root of the trouble remains and is difficult to get rid of. We believe that in the near future, big disasters are simply inevitable. We were both deeply concerned." He paused for a moment and then continued. "You are the first apprentice of our sword school. Master-Wife and I both have great expectations for you. We hope that one day you'll be able to share some of the responsibilities and tasks with us and gain great fame for our Huashan Sword School. But all you did was to tangle yourself with love affairs, neglecting your existing Kung Fu, not striving to make progress. You have really disappointed us."

Seeing the deeply worried expression on his Master's face, Linghu Chong felt even more frightened and embarrassed. He immediately knelt down. "I…I am so

sorry that I disappointed Master and Master-Wife!"

Yue Buqun reached out and propped him up, smiling. "It's good that you realize your mistake. Half a month from now, I will come back to check on your sword skills." Right after those words, he turned around and headed down the cliff.

"Master, there's this…," Linghu Chong called out, wanting to report the drawings in the back cave and the man in the green robe. Yue Buqun waved him off and then walked away.

"You must practice hard and truly master the sword moves. This is something that will affect your entire future life. You must not take it lightly," Madam Yue urged in a low voice.

"Yes, Master-Wife…," Linghu Chong answered and was about to tell her the sword moves on the rock wall and the man in the green robe. Madam Yue pointed at Yue Buqun's receding figure in a smile and waved her hand. She then turned around and caught up with her husband in big strode.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "Why did Master-Wife say that how I practice sword moves would affect my entire future life and that I must not take it lightly? Why did Master-Wife wait till Master had left and then urged me behind Master's back? Could it be…could it be…?"

A thought suddenly emerged in his head and his heart started thumping heavily while his cheeks burned with embarrassment. He didn't dare to develop that thought, but hope still rose in his heart.

"Is it possible that because Master and Master-Wife know I got ill for little apprentice sister's sake and have decided to betroth little apprentice sister to me? But the criteria is that I must work hard on my Kung Fu skills, and become capable of carrying on Master's legacy in both Qi-Gong and sword arts. Master probably thought that it was inappropriate to speak it out. Master-Wife considers me her own son, that's why she urged me behind his back. Otherwise, what else could have effects on my entire future life?" At that thought, he found himself in high spirit.

He drew his sword and picked a couple of the most advanced sword art forms Master had taught him to practice. But the drawings on the rock wall in the back cave had been so deeply engraved in his mind, regardless of which move he used he would naturally remember the many ways how others could break the move with. In the middle of the form, he withdrew his sword and held it still in the air, thinking, "I didn't get a chance to tell Master and Master-Wife about the drawings on the rock wall in the back cave this time. When they come up the cliff again half a month later, they must be able to answer my questions and rid my doubts after they study the drawings carefully."

Even though Madam Yue's words greatly encouraged him, he didn't progress much with his practice of Qi-Gong and sword arts during the half-month period. He kept going off into wild flights of fancy everyday.

"If Master and Master-Wife betrothed little apprentice sister to me, I wonder, in her own mind, whether she would agree to it or not. If we can really become husband and wife, would she forget her love to apprentice brother Lin? Well, apprentice brother Lin has only joined our school recently. He was only asking her for her advice on sword arts and sometimes chatting with her so she doesn't get bored. They don't really have true love between them. And how could that relationship compare to the relationship between little apprentice sister and I, when we grew up together and spent over ten years together everyday? That day, I almost got killed by Yu Canghai's palm strike, and thanks to apprentice brother Lin's interference with his shouting, I barely escaped death. I'd better never forget that and treat him well. If he ever gets into danger, even if I have to risk my own life, I'll definitely step forward to save him."

Half a month went by quickly. In an afternoon, the Yue Buqun couple came up the cliff again. Coming together with them were also Shi Daizi, Lu Dayou, and Yue Lingshan. Noticing that the little apprentice sister came together with them, Linghu Chong's voice trembled when he greeted Master and Master-Wife.

Madam Yue could tell that Linghu Chong had a high morale. His complexion was also completely different compared to half a month ago. She nodded with a smile and said, "Lingshan, go fill the rice bowl for your big apprentice brother.

Let him have a full stomach before he demonstrates his sword skills."

"Yes." Yue Lingshan answered. She carried the meal basket into the cave and sat it on the big rock. After taking out the bowls and utensils, she filled a bowl with rice.

"Big apprentice brother, you can eat now!" she said with a smile.

"Many…many thanks!" Linghu Chong replied.

"Why? Do you still have a fever? Why is your voice trembling when you speak?" Yue Lingshan grinned.

"It…it's nothing," Linghu Chong answered as he thought to himself, "If you will always be by my side when I eat for the many days and nights after, I won't be asking for anything else in my entire life." Not in the mood for food at the moment, he quickly finished the bowl of rice.

"Let me fill you another one," Yue Lingshan suggested.

"No, thanks! Master and Master-Wife are still waiting for me outside." Linghu Chong declined.

After Linghu Chong came out of the cave, he found Master and Master-Wife sitting on a big rock abreast. He went in front of them and bowed to salute. He wanted to say something, but then decided that no words would be appropriate. Lu Dayou winked at him with happiness piled upon his face.

"Sixth apprentice brother must have gotten some inside information and is feeling happy for me," Linghu Chong thought.

Yue Buqun had his eyes fixed onto Linghu Chong's face. After a long while he finally said, "Gengming came back from Chang-An[57] yesterday and said that Tian Boguang has just committed several big crimes in Chang-An."

"Tian Boguang has come to Chang-An? He won't be doing anything good for sure." Linghu Chong was surprised.

"Of course not! He burglarized seven families in a single night in the town of Chang-An. I wouldn't have minded that much if he was simply stealing, but he

left his handwriting on every family's walls saying, 'Borrowed by Ten Thousand Miles Loner – Tian Boguang','' Yue Buqun exclaimed.

"What?" Linghu Chong uttered a cry. He said angrily, "The town of Chang-An is right next to Mount Huashan. He obviously left those words to defame our Huashan Sword School. Master, let's…."

"Do what?" Yue Buqun asked.

"Master and Master-Wife are honorable masters, and it's not worthy to dirty your sword for such a low life scoundrel. But my Kung Fu is not good enough to match the villain, besides that I am still being punished and can't go down the cliff to look for him. That gives the villain the freedom to be on a rampage at the foot of Mount Huashan. This is so exasperating!"

"If you do have the confidence to kill that villain, of course I will let you go down the cliff and make amends for your faults with good deeds," Yue Buqun replied. "Go ahead and show us the 'Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning' your Master-Wife taught you. In the last half a year, you probably have grasped sixty to seventy percent of it. Once your Master-Wife gives you some more pointers, you might not lose to the villain Tian."

Linghu Chong was taken by a shock. He thought to himself, "Master-Wife never taught me that move." But after thinking about it a bit more, he understood, "On that day when Master-Wife demonstrated that move, even though she didn't pass it on to me formally, with my training and knowledge in our school's Kung Fu skills, I should have understood the key aspects of the sword move. Master reckoned that during the half year of practicing and polishing, I should have mastered most of it."

He repeated the name "Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning" back and forth in his head, and cold sweats started to emerge on his forehead. When he had first come up the cliff, he did ponder upon the fascinating techniques of that move many times and also practiced it several times. But ever since he discovered the drawings on the rock wall in the back cave, in his heart, he had been convinced with no doubt that each and every sword moves of the Huashan

Sword School could be defeated. The move “Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning” would especially suffer a crushing defeat. So, naturally, he had lost confidence in the sword move. Several times when the words “That move is useless. Others can break it easily.” came to his tongue, he swallowed them back. He really couldn’t criticize Master-Wife’s highly valued sword move in front of Shi Daizi and Lu Dayou.

“You haven’t mastered that move yet? That’s quite alright. That sword move represents the most advanced techniques and skills of our Huashan style Kung Fu. Your Qi-Gong is not that advanced yet, it’s only natural that you haven’t gotten it right. Give it some time, and you will get there,” noticing the strange expression on Linghu Chong’s face, Yue Buqun commented.

“Chong, don’t you want to thank your Master? He has agreed to teach you the secret formula for the Divine Art of Violet Twilight,” Madam Yue said with a smile.

“Yes! Many thanks to you, respectful Master!” Linghu Chong said in shock and quickly knelt down.

Yue Buqun reached out and stopped Linghu Chong from kneeling down. “Divine Art of Violet Twilight is our school’s most advanced Qi-Gong technique,” he said with a bright smile. “The reason why I didn’t teach you that rashly wasn’t because I wanted to keep it to myself. It was because once someone starts training with this Qi-Gong, he mustn’t have any distracting thoughts and must stay focused on advancing the skills. Any delay in the middle of the training would cause great harm to the practitioner and usually send him into a self-conflicting state. Chong, let me first see how your Kung Fu skills have progressed in the past half a year, then I will decide if I’ll teach you the secret formula for the Divine Art of Violet Twilight.”

Shi Daizi, Lu Dayou, and Yue Lingshan all showed great admiration on their faces when they heard that the big apprentice brother got to learn the Divine Art of Violet Twilight. All three of them knew that the Divine Art of Violet Twilight had magnificent powers. It was well said, “Nine skills of Huashan, Violet Twilight leads them all.” Although they were all aware that among all the

apprentices, nobody's Kung Fu skills were even close to Linghu Chong's. There was no doubt that Linghu Chong would get the mantle from the Master and become the Head Master of Huashan Sword School in the future, they still didn't expect Master to teach him the number one skill of Huashan Sword School so soon.

"Big apprentice brother works very hard. Every time when I bring the food up, I always saw big apprentice brother meditating to practice breathing exercises or practicing sword arts," Lu Dayou claimed.

Yue Lingshan threw a sharp, sideways glance at Lu Dayou and made a face to him behind everyone's back, thinking, "You Monkey Six! You are lying to their faces. You just want to help big apprentice brother anyway you can."

"Chong, draw you sword! The three of us will be fighting Tian Boguang soon. We are really making a frantic last-minute effort here. Even though we are sharpening the spear only before going into battle, it is still better than not sharpening it at all." Madam Yue grinned.

"Master-Wife, did you say the three of us are going to be fighting Tian Boguang?" Linghu Chong asked in shock.

"You challenge him in the front, and your Master and I will help you behind the scenes. No matter who kills him, we will all say that you killed him, so our fellow martial people in the Martial World won't say that your Master and I were lowering ourselves to pick a fight with him." Madam Yue explained.

"That's awesome!" Yue Lingshan put her hands together and grinned. "Since Dad and Mom are going to help out behind the scenes, then I'd have the courage to challenge him too! After he's dead, we'll just all say that I am the one who did it. That would be so nice!"

"Are you jealous? You want to enjoy the unearned gain, don't you?" Madam Yue laughed. "Your big apprentice brother has embraced untold dangers and fought with the fellow Tian Boguang for several hundred rounds. He knows Tian Boguang's actual skills very well. Can you do that with just your little bit of Kung Fu? You are just a little girl. I don't even want to hear the villain's name

mentioned out of your mouth, not mentioning having you fight him."

All of a sudden, she thrust her sword at Linghu Chong and the sword tip almost reached Linghu Chong's solar plexus. A second ago, she had been talking to her daughter in smiles, who would have expected that a second later, she had already drawn her long sword and thrust it at Linghu Chong's vital point.

Linghu Chong also reacted very quickly. In an instant, he had drawn his own sword and blocked away the attack. With a loud clanking sound, the two swords clashed in the air and Linghu Chong took a step back with his left foot.

"Swish, swish, swish, swish, swish, and swish!" Madam Yue attacked six times continuously.

"Clank, clank, clank, clank, clank, and clank!" Linghu Chong blocked six times.

"Start your counter-attack!" Madam Yue yelled out and suddenly changed her fighting style by raising the sword high and slashing and chopping it down in great speed. Those weren't a part of Huashan style sword arts.

Linghu Chong understood immediately that Master-Wife was performing Tian Boguang's fast knife chops to help him comprehend ways to break them and thus put the enemy to death. Madam Yue's attacks became faster and faster and it was almost impossible to distinguish the connection between each moves.

"Dad, Mom's moves are really fast, but aren't those still sword moves, not knife moves? I am afraid Tian Boguang's knife chops won't be like that," Yue Lingshan said to her father.

"Tian Boguang has outstanding Kung Fu skills. It's not an easy task to imitate his knife chop moves," Yue Buqun explained with a slight smile. "Your mother is not really imitating his knife arts. She is only focusing on the 'fast' part of it and performing the 'fast' part incisively and vividly. In order to rid Tian Boguang, the key lies not in how to break his knife arts, but in how to restrain the speed of his knife moves. Look at that, perfect timing! Graceful Phoenix!"

Yue Buqun noticed that Linghu Chong had slightly lowered his left shoulder while retracting his right elbow and pointing his left hand fingers to the side, then the move Graceful Phoenix immediately followed. That was the perfect move to use at the exact moment. In immense joy, he shouted out the name of the move. But as soon as the words came out of his mouth, Linghu Chong's thrust appeared weak and crooked. The thrust failed to penetrate the net weaved by Madam Yue's sword.

"What a terrible execution of the move," Yue Buqun heaved a sigh and thought to himself.

Madam Yue showed no mercy whatsoever. With three quick thrusts, she sent Linghu Chong into a frantic rush. Seeing that Linghu Chong had executed every sword move in a flustered way and that none of the moves were well organized, three out of ten moves were actually not Huashan style sword art moves at all, Yue Buqun soon had a ghastly expression on his face.

Although Linghu Chong's sword moves were really disorganized, he managed to block the swift and fierce attacks by Madam Yue. After he retreated next to the rock wall and had no more space to retract to, he gradually started his counter-attack. When a chance suddenly presented itself, he immediately attacked with the move Green Pines Welcoming Guests. His sword tip seemed to have transformed into countless sparks and pelted toward Madam Yue's tempos.

A loud bang exploded as Madam Yue blocked the attack with her sword. She quickly waved her sword in front of herself for protection. Madam Yue knew well that the move Green Pines Welcoming Guests had several powerful additional techniques. Although Linghu Chong had mastered that move well and would never really hit her with it, it was still a tough move to defend, so she changed into a defending stance from the previous attacking stance and waited in great focus. But who would have thought that Linghu Chong's long sword came in such a slow speed with no strength attached – it didn't even pose a threat.

"Execute your moves attentively. What the heck are you imagining in your head?" Madam Yue yelled and slashed her sword three times. Seeing that Linghu

Chong jumped around and dodged those moves, she shouted, “What kind of Green Pines Welcoming Guests was that? Have you returned all your sword training back to your Master because of your illness?”

“Sorry!” Linghu Chong replied as he returned the attack with two of his own thrusts. His face was covered with embarrassment.

Noticing that Master’s face look more and more discontented, Shi Daizi and Lu Dayou were both worried. Rustling sounds rose suddenly as Madam Yue began circling around the field. Her green skirt seemed to have transformed into a blurry green shadow. Reflections from her sword glimmered, and because of her great speed, all of her sword moves became indistinct.

Linghu Chong’s brain seemed to have become a pool of muddle. All kinds of thoughts flashed by in his head and created chaos. “If I use Galloping Steeds, the opponent can use the brilliant level blocking move to overcome it. If I use the sideway thrust, I’d undoubtedly be getting a terrible wound.” As soon as he thought of a sword move from the Huashan sword art, he couldn’t help but remember a move on the rock wall that would break the sword move. The reason why he gave up halfway when he used the moves Graceful Phoenix and Green Pines Welcoming Guests was because he had remembered the different ways that can be used to break those two moves. He had become very scared, thus instinctively, he would stop half way through the execution and retract into a defending stance.

Madam Yue had used the fast sword moves hoping to lead him into using the “Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning” to beat the opponent and claim victory, but Linghu Chong simply blocked using random moves. He simply wasn’t focused. It appeared as if he was completely terror-stricken and scared out of his wit. She had long known that Linghu Chong had great courage and was the fear-nothing type. She had never seen him fight like this before.

“Don’t you want to use that move?” greatly annoyed, Madam Yue yelled out loudly.

“Yes Ma’am!” Linghu Chong answered as he thrust his sword straightforward.

The way he used the technique and the way the sword traveled matched the move created by Madam Yue – Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning – exactly.

"Good!" Madam Yue shouted. She knew this move was an ultimately swift and fierce one, so she dared not to take it head on, but instead, dodged to the side and shot out a back prick.

But meanwhile, Linghu Chong was actually thinking to himself, "This move is not going to work. It's useless. It will only get me a crushing defeat."

Suddenly, a tremendous shock came from his wrist and his long sword flew out of his grip into the air. "Ah…!" in astonishment, Linghu Chong burst out a cry.

Wasting no time, Madam Yue immediately thrust her sword straight forth. The force of the thrust sent the blade whistling through the air. It was none other than the move she had created – Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning. But this time, the power of the move was even greater than when she first created the move the other day.

Ever since she created that proud move of hers, she had been pondering over the move every single day about how to make it faster and how to make it more powerful so that the thrust would guarantee a hit that the enemy would have no chance of dodging or blocking. She was completely outraged when she saw how Linghu Chong executed this proud move of hers – the beginning part looked similar, but half way through, the core part turned out to be completely different. It was almost like someone tried to draw a tiger and ended up with the likeness of a dog. Linghu Chong had acted like a good-for-nothing fellow and had executed an extremely powerful killer move in a wretched and sloppy way. In great rage, she decided to execute the move herself instead.

Although she didn't intend to hurt her apprentice, the move was simply too powerful. Before the tip of the sword even reached the target, the energy coming from the sword had completely enveloped Linghu Chong's entire body.

Yue Buqun could tell that Linghu Chong had no way of dodging or blocking

the attack, not mentioning putting together a counter-attack. On the other day when Madam Yue's sword touched Linghu Chong's clothes, she immediately shocked the sword into pieces with her inner energy. But the thrust today had all the energy focused right on the sword tip. In that mode, Madam Yue might not be able to pull it back.

"Oh, no!" Yue Buqun groaned inwardly as he drew the sword by his daughter's waist in a rush and took a step forward. He was ready to jump forth to block Madam Yue's sword if it would reach half a foot further. He and Madam Yue had been fellow apprentice before, so their skill levels weren't that far apart from each other. Even though Yue Buqun was slightly better, since Madam Yue was already half way into her move, he had no certainty of successfully blocking the thrust away. All he could do was to wish inwardly that Linghu Chong would only be slightly wounded.

In the nick of time, Linghu Chong's fingertip happened to touch the sheath hung by his waist. He slightly bent his knees to lower his body and then aimed the sheath straight at Madam Yue's sword tip. This posture was exactly the same one as the drawing on the rock wall in the back cave – the staff wielding man aimed his staff straight at the opponent's sword tip so the staff and the sword made a perfect straight line; once the two forces collided, the sword would have to break in half. Linghu Chong's head was already in chaos with the many images of the moves drawn on the rock wall flashing back and forth. After his sword was knocked out of his grip, seeing Madam Yue's thunder-like attack heading toward his way, he had no idea how to dodge the attack, so in order to save his own life, he naturally remembered the move drawn on the rock wall without thinking. The attack came in great speed; his counter move also happened in great speed. There was really no time for him to even think much about it, much less looking for a staff. Since his fingertip happened to touch the sheath, he immediately aimed the sheath at the sword in a straight line. Even if his fingertip had happened to touch a block of mud or a straw, he would have used the same move to aim it at the sword in a straight line. Once the move was out, it naturally gathered his strength around his arms, and with a clanking sound, the sword went right into the sheath. It turned out that in panic, Linghu

Chong didn't even think about turning the sheath around. As soon as he grabbed onto the sheath, he immediately aimed it at the coming sword tip, and had actually aimed the opening end of the sheath at the sword; that was why Madam Yue's long sword didn't break in half but instead went straight into the sheath.

In great bewilderment, Madam Yue only felt a great pain coming from her palm while her sword being taken out of her grip by Linghu Chong using the sheath. The move Linghu Chong used contained many additional techniques, and by then Linghu Chong had lost control of himself. Almost instinctively, he jabbed the sheath forward toward Madam Yue's throat, and the weapon on its way toward Madam Yue's throat was none other than the handle of her own sword.

Half astonished and half outraged, Yue Buqun waved his long sword and knocked it onto the sheath in Linghu Chong's grip. He used the Divine Art of Violet Twilight with this hit. Linghu Chong only felt a stream of warmth surged through his body and had no choice but to stumble three big steps back until he lost his balance and sat down on the ground heavily. The sheath, together with the sword in it, broke into several pieces before falling to the ground. Right at the instant, in a white flash, the long sword in the air fell with its tip pointing down and went all the way into the ground, leaving only the handle showing above ground. Shi Daizi, Lu Dayou, and Yue Lingshan were simply dazzled by the unexpected scene.

Yue Buqun rushed in front of Linghu Chong. Reaching out with his right hand, he slapped Linghu Chong hard on each of his cheeks.

"You dirty swine! What were you doing?" he yelled in rage.

Linghu Chong felt dizzy and almost fell to the ground. As soon as he regained himself, he knelt down on the ground.

"Master, Master-Wife, please forgive me."

Yue Buqun's anger exploded. "In the last half a year, what contemplation have you been pondering over and what Kung Fu have you been practicing?" he

shouted furiously.

"I…I didn't…didn't practice any Kung Fu," Linghu Chong answered in terror.

"Where did you get your wild imagination to create that move against your Master-Wife?" Yue Buqun asked again in a stern voice.

"I…I didn't think. In the urgency, I just happened…happened to use it," Linghu Chong answered haltingly.

Yue Buqun heaved a sigh. "I figured that you just happened to use it without much thinking. That's why I am getting very angry. Do you know that you have gone on to the evil way and might not be able to extricate yourself?"

"Master, would you please explain?" Linghu Chong bowed his head down.

After quite a long while, Madam Yue finally calmed herself down. Seeing Linghu Chong's swollen cheeks in black and purple from her husband's heavy slaps, she couldn't help but feel pity and sorry for him.

"You can get up now! You didn't know the crux of the matter anyway," she said to Linghu Chong.

Turning toward her husband, she said, "Apprentice brother, Chong is a very bright boy. In the past half a year, he trained all by himself and couldn't reach the two of us for any advice. That's probably why he got onto the evil way. But he hasn't gone very far in that evil direction. It's still not too late to correct him and get him back to the righteous way."

Yue Buqun nodded. "Get up now," he said to Linghu Chong.

Linghu Chong stood up slowly. Staring at the long sword and the sheath on the ground each broken in three pieces, he was dazzled, having no idea why Master and Master-Wife both said that his training had gone onto the evil way.

"Come over here, all of you." Yue Buqun waved at Shi Daizi and the bunch.

"Yes, Master," Shi Daizi, Lu Dayou, and Yue Lingshan answered in unison and walked by Yue Buqun's side.

"Twenty-five years ago, our Huashan Sword School's Kung Fu used to be in

two styles: the righteous style and the evil style," Yue Buqun sat down on a big rock and explained slowly.

Linghu Chong and the rest of the apprentices became very confused, each thinking, "Huashan Sword School Kung Fu is Huashan Sword School Kung Fu. How could there be the distinctively righteous style and the evil style? Why hasn't Master ever mentioned this to us before?"

"Dad," Yue Lingshan interrupted, "the Kung Fu we learned naturally is the righteous style Kung Fu, isn't it?"

"Of course it is! Why would someone go on with his training knowing that he was learning the heterodox style Kung Fu?" Yue Buqun affirmed. "But the heterodox branch claimed that they were the real orthodox branch and called our branch the heterodox branch. Time became the best judge to decide which one is righteous and which one is evil. The heterodox branch eventually vanished like mist and smokes and has been gone for the last twenty-five years."

"No wonder I had never heard about it before. Dad, since the heterodox branch had been long gone, I guess we don't have to worry about them anymore," Yue Lingshan commented.

"What do you know?" Yue Buqun mocked. "The heterodox branch wasn't really like those evil heterodox clans and cults out there today. They were still using our school's own Kung Fu skills, but they had a different focus in their training. When I teach you Kung Fu skills, what do I teach you at the very beginning?" He fixed his stare on Linghu Chong's face.

"You first taught us the formula and techniques on how to control and manipulate our inner energy. We start training with Qi-Gong," Linghu Chong answered.

"That's correct. In our Huashan Sword School style Kung Fu, the key lies in the words 'Inner Energy.' Once your inner energy is developed with Qi-Gong practices, then regardless of what you use as your weapon, let be your fists and legs, or knives and swords, you will succeed whenever you go. That is the righteous way for training in our school. But among the senior grandmasters of

our school, there were a group of people who believed that the key of our school's Kung Fu lied in the word 'Sword,' and that once someone developed his sword skills, even with ordinary level of inner energy, he could still defeat the enemy. The main divergence between the righteous branch and the evil branch lies right here."

"Dad, I have a comment. Promise me that you won't get mad at me," Yue Lingshan interrupted again.

"What comment?" Yue Buqun asked.

"I think in our school's Kung Fu, no doubt inner energy part is critical, but we can't overlook sword skills either. If one only has great inner energy, but doesn't have good sword skills, he still won't be able to demonstrate the power of our Huashan style Kung Fu," Yue Lingshan said.

Yue Buqun let out a snort. "Who said that sword skills weren't important? The main point here is about which drives which. Inner energy is the driving force here after all."

"Wouldn't it be nice if both inner energy and sword skills were the driving forces?" Yue Lingshan asked.

"This comment of yours alone is sending you closer to the evil way. When you say both of them are the driving forces, you are really saying that neither of them is the driving force. The old saying said, once the head-rope of a fishing-net is pulled up, all its meshes open. Which is the key link and which is the mesh? We must be very clear about it. In those years when they had the discussion about the righteous style and the evil style, our school had earthshaking changes that turned the entire Huashan Sword School upside down. If you said those words thirty years ago, your head probably wouldn't be still on your neck longer than half a day."

"Just because a wrong comment, they'd chop people's heads off? Wow! Aren't they too overbearing or what?" Yue Lingshan stuck her tongue out in disbelief.

"When I was still a teenager, the fight between the Qi-Branch and the Sword-

Branch in our Huashan Sword School hadn't produced a winner," Yue Buqun explained. "If you had said that comment in public during that period of time, people from the Qi-Branch would want to kill you, and people from the Sword-Branch would want you dead just the same. You said that inner energy and sword skills were as important as each other and both should be the driving forces. The Qi-Branch would of course interpret that as that you were elevating Sword-Branch's position above them; the Sword-Branch would think that you mixed up the key line with the meshes and would still blame you for treason and heresy."

"What's there to argue about? If they wanted to know who was right and who was wrong, have a contest, then they'd know right away!" Yue Lingshan said.

Yue Buqun heaved a long sigh and said slowly, "Over thirty years ago, our Qi-Branch was the minority. Uncle-Masters in the Sword-Branch were the majority. In addition to that, Sword-Branch Kung Fu skills can be mastered easily and quickly. If everyone trains for ten years, then the Sword-Branch will definitely have the lead. If every one trains for twenty years, then each side would have an equal opportunity to claim victory. Only after twenty years and more training, people trained with Qi-Branch Kung Fu would gradually become better and stronger. After thirty years of training, people trained with Sword-Branch Kung Fu would then be left far behind and never stand a chance to compete again. But that means it takes at least twenty years to actually find out which one is better. You could probably imagine how fierce and intense the fight was during the twenty years or so time period."

"So at the very end, the Sword-Branch people admitted their mistakes and their failure, didn't they?" Yue Lingshan asked.

Yue Buqun shook his head silently. After a long while, he finally spoke again.

"They all insisted on their theory stubbornly and never admitted their failure. Even though they suffered a crushing defeat in the big sword contest on the Jade Maiden Peak, most of them …most of them took their own lives with their own swords. The remaining ones all quietly withdrew from society and lived in solitude and never showed themselves in the Martial World again."

“Ah!” Linghu Chong, Yue Lingshan and the bunch of apprentices all uttered a cry of astonishment.

“They were all apprentice brothers in the same school. It was just a sword contest. What was that big of a deal? Why did they take it so hard?” Yue Lingshan asked.

“It was concerning the foundation of martial arts theories. It wasn’t just a small matter as apprentice brothers sparring each other,” Yue Buqun said seriously. “In that year when the Five Mountains sword schools fought for the hosting right of the Alliance Chief, our school really had the most talented people with the highest Kung Fu skills. But because of the fierce internal fight in our school, over twenty elite senior masters got killed in that big sword contest on top of Jade Maiden Peak. Sure, the Sword-Branch had a crushing defeat, but many elite fighters in the Qi-Branch lost their lives also. That’s how Songshan Sword School took the Alliance Chief title eventually. The fight between the Qi-Branch and the Sword-Branch of the Huashan Sword School was really the root of the trouble.”

Linghu Chong and the rest all nodded again and again.

“It’s all right that our school didn’t get to be the host for Alliance Chief. It’s also all right that the Huashan Sword School’s fame was damaged dramatically. But what was not all right was the fact that apprentice brothers in our own school were killing each other ruthlessly because of the internal dissension. Those apprentice brothers used to be like real brothers to each other, but it turned so cruel and brutal, either you kill me or I’ll kill you. When I think about the scenes on Mount Huashan in those years, how everyone felt they could die at any minute, my heart still flutters with fear.” At those words, he cast a glance at Madam Yue.

Madam Yue’s face slightly twitched. She couldn’t help but feel the terror when she remembered many years ago how the elite fighters in Huashan Sword School had slaughtered each other.

Yue Buqun slowly unbuttoned his clothes and exposed his chest as Yue

Lingshan shouted in shock.

"Oh my God! Dad, you…you…!"

A two feet long scar lay across his chest from his left shoulder reaching all the way to his right chest. The wound had healed a long time ago, but a pale reddish line still showed clearly. Apparently the wound was so severe that Yue Buqun almost lost his life because of it. Both Linghu Chong and Yue Lingshan had grown up by Yue Buqun's side, but neither of them had known about the scar until now.

Yue Buqun explained as he started to button his clothes. "In that day of the big sword contest atop Jade Maiden Peak, an Uncle-Master in our school hit me with a strong sword slash. I fainted immediately. He probably thought I was already dead and paid no more attention to me. If he had conveniently stabbed me again, hmm!"

"Then undoubtedly that you, Father, wouldn't be sitting here today, and who knows where I, Yue Lingshan, would be at?" Yue Lingshan grinned.

Yue Buqun let out a slight smile but his face soon turned solemn again. "This is a big secret of our Huashan Sword School. Don't any of you let it out! Although people from other schools knew that the Huashan Sword School had lost over twenty elite masters in a single day, none of them knew the truth lying behind it. We only claimed to the outside world that a plague suddenly broke out and almost wiped out our entire Huashan Sword School. We should never let others know about this disgraceful event that happened to our school. The reason why I had to tell you all the cause and effect today is because the consequences could be very severe. If Chong followed the current path and went on with his training, then within three years, he would think 'sword skill is more important than inner energy' and get trapped in an extremely dangerous state of mind. That will not only destroy you and the ultimately true orthodox Kung Fu of our Huashan Sword School, earned by many senior masters sacrificing their lives, but also our entire Huashan Sword School."

Cold sweats broke out all over Linghu Chong's body as he listened in. "I've

made a terrible mistake. Master and Master-Wife, please punish me heavily," He bowed his head down in shame.

"Well," Yue Buqun said with a sigh, "it is really an unintentional mistake you have made. You are really not to blame. But think about the many Uncle-Masters of the Sword-Branch. They all had good intentions to build great fame for our school using extreme Kung Fu, yet once they went on the wrong way and had gone too far down the road, they simply couldn't extricate themselves any more. If I don't give you a blow and shout right now, with your intelligence and temper, you could easily end up taking the evil route to try to find shortcuts for quick effects."

"Yes, Master!" Linghu Chong answered.

"Chong, how did you think of the earlier move that used the sheath to take away my sword?" Madam Yue asked.

"I only wanted to get out from Master-Wife's extremely powerful attack. Who would have thought…who would have thought…?" Linghu Chong felt so ashamed and embarrassed.

"That's it. By now you probably understand which one is truly superior between Qi-Branch and Sword-Branch. This move of yours is surely a clever one, but as soon as it met with your Master's first-class Qi-Gong, despite of how clever it is, it would be rendered useless. When the two branches had the big sword contest on Jade Maiden Peak that year, elite fighters from the Sword-Branch had dazzling magical moves that were ultimately brilliant, but your Grandmaster relied on his Divine Art of Violet Twilight to counter motion with standstill and defy cleverness with dullness. He was able to defeat over ten elite fighters from the Sword-Branch and affirmed the foundation of our school's orthodox Kung Fu. All of your must take your Master's advice to your heart and ponder over it again and again. The Kung Fu of our school uses inner energy as the foundation and sword skills as the implementation; inner energy is the driving force and sword skill is the secondary; inner energy is the key line and sword skill is the mesh. If you can't succeed with your inner energy development, despite of how strong you are with your sword skills, it is still

useless after all."

Linghu Chong, Shi Daizi, Lu Dayou, and Yue Lingshan all bowed down for the preaching of Madam Yue.

"Chong, I had planned to teach you the entry formula for the Divine Art of Violet Twilight today and then bring you down Mount Huashan to kill the villain Tian Boguang, but we'd better postpone that for now," Yue Buqun said. "During the next two months, you can practice the breathing exercise for Qi-Gong training I taught you before diligently and forget all about those heterodoxy and weird sword moves. I will check on you again later to see if you have any progress." At those words, he suddenly put on a stern tone, "But if you obstinately stick to the wrong course and stay on Sword-Branch's evil route, humph, a harsher punishment would be to take your life, and a lighter punishment would be to destroy all the Kung Fu you have and banish you out of our school once and for all. By then, it would be too late to beg for mercy, and don't you blame me for not explaining everything clearly to you beforehand!"

Cold sweat streamed down Linghu Chong's forehead. "Yes, Master. I would never dare to do so," he said.

"Lingshan," Yue Buqun turned to his daughter, "Dayou and you are both the impetuous type. You two should also remember what I just said to your big apprentice brother."

"Yes, Master!" Lu Dayou answered immediately.

"Sixth apprentice brother and I are impatient, but we are not as smart as big apprentice brother and won't be able to create sword moves of our own. Dad, you can relax," Yue Lingshan argued.

"You won't be able to create sword moves of your own? Didn't you create a sword form called Chong-Ling Sword Art with Chong?" Yue Buqun snorted.

Linghu Chong and Yue Lingshan both blushed.

"Sorry Master, we were being mischievous." Linghu Chong asked for

forgiveness.

"That was a long, long time ago. I was still a kid by then who didn't know anything and was just playing with big apprentice brother. How did you hear about it?" Yue Lingshan grinned.

"My apprentices wanted to create sword art of their own and start a new style. If I, the Head Master, still had no clue, wouldn't I have become a muddle-head?"

"D-a-a-a-d, you are still making fun of me!" Yue Lingshan pulled onto her father's sleeve and whined.

Linghu Chong, on the other hand, felt a great shock in his heart when he noticed that there was no sign of joking from the Master's tone of voice or the expression on his face.

Yue Buqun stood up. "When someone advanced into the higher level of our school's Kung Fu, even a petal of flower or a leaf could be used as a weapon to injure the enemy. Others might think that the Huashan Sword School is only good at its sword skills. They have really belittled us."

Yue Buqun flicked his left sleeve, and the long sword by Lu Dayou's waist jumped out of the sheath as the stream of energy reached it. He then followed with a flick from his right sleeve. As soon as the sleeve touched the blade, the sword broke in half with a loud cracking sound.

Linghu Chong and the rest of the apprentices were seized by terror while Madam Yue eyed her husband with tremendous admiration and respect.

"Let's go!" Yue Buqun said and walked off the cliff together with Madam Yue. Yue Lingshan, Shi Daizi, and Lu Dayou followed behind them.

Staring at the two broken swords laying still on the ground, Linghu Chong was half stunned and half thrilled. He thought, "It turned out that our school's Kung Fu is really powerful. No one would be able to defeat our sword art regardless of which move Master uses. All those drawings on the rock wall in the back cave claimed that the unique sword moves of the Five Mountains

Sword Alliance were defeatable, yet the Five Mountains Sword Alliance is still able to enjoy great fames in the Martial World today. Hence every sword school has advanced Qi-Gong as the foundation, and once the sword move is executed with vigorous inner energy, it would be difficult to defeat. This is actually a very simple principle, but I had forgot about it when my thoughts were on the wrong track and went to a dead end. With the same move of Graceful Phoenix, how could I treat the one executed by apprentice brother Lin and the one executed by Master as the same? The staff wielding man can defeat apprentice brother Lin's Graceful Phoenix, but he would stand no chance defeating Master's Graceful Phoenix."

Finally able to figure out the answer to his puzzled mind, Linghu Chong ridded himself of all shadows of anxiety. Even though Master didn't teach him the Divine Art of Violet Twilight, nor did he say anything about betrothing Yue Lingshan to marry him, Linghu Chong didn't feel depressed in any way. On the contrary, he was gratified for gaining back his confidence in the Huashan Sword School's Kung Fu. But when he remembered how he had had the wildest fantasy thinking that Master and Master-Wife would betroth their daughter to marry him, he blushed in great embarrassment.

At dusk the next day, Lu Dayou brought food up the cliff.

"Big apprentice brother, Master and Master-Wife left for Northern Shanxi early this morning."

"Northern Shanxi? Why not Chang-An?" Linghu Chong asked with a bit of surprise.

"The chap Tian Boguang committed several more crimes in the town of Yan-An. It turned out that the villain is no longer in Chang-An," Lu Dayou explained.

"Oh!" Linghu Chong replied.

He thought that since Master and Master-Wife had attended the matter personally, Tian Boguang would have no chance of surviving, but deep in his mind, he couldn't help but feel sorry for Tian Boguang.

“For a guy like Tian Boguang, who loves porn and lewd obscenities, and has been committing crimes after crimes against innocent people, even death would not expiate all his sins. He surely has high Kung Fu skills, and in the two fights between the two of us, he acted open and upright and showed the qualities of a true man. What a pity that he chooses to commit evil deeds and thus become a public enemy of the entire Martial World.”

Throughout the next two days, Linghu Chong focused on practicing his Qi-Gong and never went back into the back cave to study the drawings on the rock wall. Whenever thoughts about the drawings came into his mind, he would force them out instantly with no hesitation and tried his best to avoid them. He kept thinking, “Fortunately Master shouted his advice to me in time. Otherwise, I’d be going on the wrong road and become a sinner of our Huashan Sword School. What a close call!”

One day, after dinner, Linghu Chong meditated for a couple of hours when he suddenly heard someone climbing up the cliff. The sounds of footsteps appeared to be swift and agile. It was obvious that the person had great Kung Fu skills. Linghu Chong felt a shock in his heart.

“He’s not someone from our sword school. Why is he coming up the cliff? Could he be the masked man in the green robe?”

He rushed into the back cave and picked up a Huashan sword to hang by his waist before rushing back to the front cave. Only moments later, the person had climbed up the cliff.

“Brother Linghu, your old friend is here to visit you!” the fellow shouted.

The voice sounded very familiar to Linghu Chong and it only took him a short moment before realizing that it was the voice of “Ten Thousand Miles Loner” Tian Boguang.

In astonishment, Linghu Chong thought to himself, “Master and Master-Wife went down Mount Huashan to go after you, yet you are still so bold to come up Mount Huashan yourself. What do you want here?”

He walked out from the cave and greeted with a smile. “Brother Tian, what a

big surprise that you have come such a long way to visit me!”

Tian Boguang carried two large bamboo baskets on a shoulder pole. He sat the bamboo baskets on the ground and then took out a large jar from each of the basket, a big smile on his face.

“I heard that brother Linghu had become a prisoner on top of Mount Huashan, so I figured that he must have been drooling for a good drink of wine, that’s why I took two jars of one hundred and thirty year old mellow wine from the cellar of Chang-An Banished Fairy Wine House, so I can drink my fill together with brother Linghu,” he said.

Linghu Chong took several steps closer. Sure enough, under the moonlight, the trademark in golden characters on red papers “Banished Fairy Wine House” could be clearly seen glued to the two huge wine-jars. The trademark papers and the seals on the wine-jars appeared to be quite aged. It was obvious that those two wine-jars weren’t anything current. He couldn’t help but feel delighted.

“Wow, to carry a hundred pound of wine all the way up Mount Huashan, what a big present! Come! Come! Let’s have a drink!” His face split into a big smile.

Linghu Chong took two big bowls out from inside the cave. As soon as Tian Boguang opened the seal, the wonderful smell of the mellow wine filled the air. Before he even had a chance to taste it, Linghu Chong already felt tipsy.

“Have a taste! What do you think?” Tian Boguang poured a bowl of wine from the wine-jar.

Linghu Chong took the bowl and drank a big swallow. “This is superb!” he praised and then poured the entire bowl of wine down his throat. Raising his thumb up, he said, “Famous wine! It’s really exceptional!”

“I’ve heard that out of all the famous wines, Fen-Wine ranks number one in northern China, and Shao-Wine leads the rest in southern China. Actually the best Fen-Wine is not in Shan-Xi[58] Province but in the town of Chang-An. And in the town of Chang-An, the best one would be none other than the ‘Banished Fairy Wine House’ where Li Taiba[59] used to get drunk all the time many years

ago. And in the entire world, other than these two jars of wine, no one will be able to find a third one left," Tian Boguang grinned.

"Are you saying that they only had these two jars of wine left in the cellar of the Banished Fairy Wine House?" Linghu Chong asked in surprise.

"After I took these two wine-jars, there were still about two hundred jars left in the cellar. I figured that if all those high officials and noble lords in the town of Chang-An, the ordinary and vulgar ones, could go to the Banished Fairy Wine House to enjoy such wonderful wine as long as they have money in their pockets, then how could the Big Hero Linghu of the Huashan Sword School stand out from all the ordinary? Therefore I banged and whammed, and soon the entire cellar was filled with the wonderful smell of wine as the flood of wine went up almost to my waist," Tian Boguang explained in amusement.

"Are you saying that you actually smashed two hundred or so jars of wine into pieces?" Linghu Chong was half stunned and half amused.

"Wouldn't it be more valuable if there were only two jars left in the entire world? Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" Tian Boguang burst into loud laughter.

"Thanks! Many thanks!" Linghu Chong drank another bowl. "It is so troublesome for you to carry these two jars of wine all the way from Chang-An to Mount Huashan, brother Tian. Even if they were filled with pure water, I'd owe you a debt of gratitude, anyhow, not mentioning that they were filled with famous wine."

"You are a good man! A real man!" Tian Boguang praised loudly with his thumbs up.

"Why are you praising me all of a sudden?" Linghu Chong asked.

"I am an infamous evil rapist who commits all kinds of crimes. I've severely wounded you before and have also committed several crimes right by the foot of Mount Huashan. Everyone in the Huashan Sword School wished to kill me. But when I carried the wine here today, brother Linghu drank it with complete ease, without ever worrying that I might plant poison in the wine. Only a true man with such breath of mind is worth enjoying such worldly famous wine."

“Brother Tian, you are making fun of me now. I have fought you twice and knew well that even though brother Tian has very bad conducts, you would disdain to stab anyone on the back. Besides, your Kung Fu skills are way higher than mine. If you want to kill me, all you have to do is to draw your knife and chop down. What’s so difficult about that?” Linghu Chong said.

“Brother Linghu, you said it right!” Tian Boguang laughed some more. “But did you know that I didn’t carry these two jars of wine directly from Chang-An to Mount Huashan? I carried these hundred-pound wine first to Northern Shanxi for two robberies, and then to Eastern Shanxi for another two robberies before I finally came up Mount Huashan.”

Linghu Chong was stunned. He pondered over it and quickly understood. “So brother Tian continuously committed many crimes just to divert my Master and Master-Wife away, so you can come and see me. You’ve used the strategy of luring the enemy away from the base. Brother Tian, after going through all these trouble, what do you exactly want from me?” he said.

“Brother Linghu, why don’t you give it a wild guess?” Tian Boguang suggested with a smile.

“No way!” Linghu Chong rejected. He poured a bowl full of wine and then said, “Brother Tian, you are a guest here at Mount Huashan. I don’t have anything in exchange for your present here on the barren cliff. I am just going to borrow something to make a gift of it. Please enjoy a bowl of number one wine in the world.”

“Thanks!” Tian Boguang answered and poured the bowl of wine down his throat.

Linghu Chong also drank a bowl of wine as accompany. After showing each other the empty bottom of the bowls, the two set the bowls down and broke into a laugh at the same time. All of a sudden, Linghu Chong kicked out with his right leg, and with two loud bangs, the two large wine-jars were kicked down the deep valley. Only after a long while, two muffled smashing sounds came back from the bottom.

“Why did you kick the wine-jars down, brother Linghu?” Tian Boguang asked in shock.

“Tian Boguang,” Linghu Chong answered, “we don’t belong to the same sides of the society. You have committed numerous crimes and harmed many innocent people. Everyone in the Martial World hates your guts. I drank three bowls of wine with you because I think you are someone upright and not some kind of shameless filthy scoundrel. Our relationship stops right here. You’ve brought me two jars of great wine, but even if you put all the precious jewels and treasures right in front me, do you think you can buy Linghu Chong to be your friend?” He yelled as he drew his long sword, “Tian Boguang, let me try your fast knife chop moves one more time!”

Tian Boguang didn’t draw his knife. He shook his head with a slight smile on his face. “Brother Linghu, your respectful school’s sword art is brilliant, but you are still too young and haven’t grasped the depth of it. Right now with your sword skills, you are still no match for me.”

Linghu Chong thought for a second and then nodded in agreement. “What you said is very true. Within the next ten years, Linghu Chong would stand no chance of ever killing you, brother Tian.” With a loud clanking sound, he sent his long sword back into the sheath.

“Whosoever understands the times is a great man!” Tian Boguang burst into loud laughter.

“Linghu Chong is only a nobody in the Martial World. I suppose you made nothing of hardships to Mount Huashan not for my head on my neck. We are enemies, not friends. No matter what you want me to do, I won’t do it.” Linghu Chong announced.

“But you haven’t even given yourself a chance to hear my proposal yet.” Tian Boguang was amused.

“Precisely!” Linghu Chong said. “No matter what you propose, I won’t agree. Since I can’t beat you in a fight, I’d better lubricate my heels and have the run for it.” Before the word even faded in the air, he had already turned around the

corner to the back of the cliff.

Linghu Chong knew well that Tian Boguang could run very fast. That was how he got his nickname "Ten Thousand Miles Loner." He had good knife skills, but there were plenty of people in the Martial World who could beat him. He had been committing various crimes for the last ten years or so. Yet because he was always on good alert and had first-class Qing-Gong skills, during the several times when the Chivalry Side gathered a good amount of people to hunt him down, no one was even able to touch him. For this reason when Linghu Chong started running, he ran with all his strength.

He thought he was fast, but Tian Boguang was even faster. Only after Linghu Chong dashed out some thirty feet, he already found Tian Boguang blocking the way in front of him. He turned around immediately heading toward the front of the cliff, thinking that he might be able to jump down the cliff to the lower slope, but only after about ten steps, Tian Boguang had caught up with him again and blocked in front of him with his arms stretching out, laughing hectically.

"No chance of running away, I guess we'll have to pick a fight! Brother Tian, you can't blame me if I call for help now!" Linghu Chong took three steps back and shouted.

"Well," Tian Boguang said with a grin, "if your respectful Master can come, then it would be my turn to lubricate my heels and take the run for it. Too bad Mr. and Madam Yue are in Eastern Shanxi right now, which is at least a hundred and fifty miles away from here, and would have no chance of coming back to save you. You do have some apprentice brothers and sisters, but if they come up the cliff, none of them would make a decent opponent. All the guys would lose their lives for nothing, and all the girls…ha-ha, ha-ha." The tone of his laughter was filled with ill intentions.

Linghu Chong gasped. He thought to himself, "The 'Cliff of Contemplation' is far away from the Huashan Sword School's main hall. Even if I shout with all my might, the apprentice brothers and sisters probably still won't be able to hear a thing. This fellow is an infamous rapist, what if he bumped into little

apprentice sister…oops! That was a close call! Luckily I wasn't able to run away earlier, or else, Tian Boguang would have gone to the main hall of Huashan Sword School to look for me for sure, and then naturally he would bump into little apprentice sister. If the pretty and lovely little apprentice sister had fallen into the evil rapist's hands, I…I'd deserve ten-thousand deaths." He rolled his eyes and quickly made up his mind. "Right now the best thing to do probably is to muddle with him perfunctorily and to stall him for more time. Hence I can't take him by force, I'll have to take him by strategy. As long as I can stall him till Master and Master-Wife make it back to Mount Huashan, then everything would be fine."

"Fine! I can't win in a fight, nor can I run away, nor can I find any help…." Linghu Chong put his hands out and shrugged, signaling that he had given up and Tian Boguang could do anything as he please.

"Brother Linghu, you must have misunderstood me and thought that I am here to give you trouble. It is actually something that will benefit you in a good deal, and you will definitely thank me sincerely for that later," Tian Boguang said with a broad smile.

"You have done many evil deeds and gained yourself a notorious reputation. Despite how beneficial this thing you speak about is for me, I, Linghu Chong, will preserve my own purity and never wallow in the mire with you." Linghu Chong waved him off.

"I am the infamous evil rapist, but brother Linghu is the proud disciple of the number one gentleman in the Martial World – Mr. Yue. Of course you can't wallow in the mire with me. But if that's the case today, why not before?" Tian Boguang grinned.

"What do you mean by 'if that's the case today, why not before'?" Linghu Chong asked.

"In the Huiyan Wine House of Hengyang, brother Linghu, you and I had the companionship of drinking on the same table," Tian Boguang claimed.

"Linghu Chong is a big alcoholic. We were just having a couple of drinks

together. It was nothing."

"In the Jade House of Hengshan, brother Linghu, you and I had the same aesthetic pleasure of visiting prostitutes in the same brothel."

"Bah!" Linghu Chong spit to the ground. "At that time I was severely wounded and had been rescued. I was just recovering in the Jade House temporarily. What has that got anything to do with visiting prostitutes?"

"But in the Jade House, didn't you have the great pleasure of sleeping with two gorgeous and lovely girls under the same quilt?" Tian Boguang split into a big grin.

Linghu Chong felt a great shock in his heart. He yelled out loud, "Tian Boguang, you'd better watch you mouth! I have a clean reputation, and those two girls are also as pure as crystal and jade. If you keep spilling out such filthy lies, I won't be so easy on you."

"What good does it do if you don't go easy on me today? If you want to uphold the clean reputation of the Huashan Sword School, you should have treated those two girls with some respect. Why did you get under the same quilt with those two girls and rubbed up and down in front of all those heroes of the Qingcheng Sword School, Hengshan Sword School, and Heng-Shan Sword School, stopping at nothing? Ha-ha, ha-ha!"

Infuriated, Linghu Chong threw a fist at him fiercely, which Tian Boguang easily dodged with a big grin.

"It's no good trying to deny it! If you hadn't gotten petty advantages of those two little girls on the bed under the quilt, why would they all get lovesickness for you today?"

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "This man is a shameless rascal. It is possible that anything would come out of his mouth. If I tangle myself with him in such an inexplicable way, who knows what more garbage is going to come out of his mouth? That day in Huiyan Wine House of Hengyang, he fell for my trick. That was the most galling shame and humiliation he has ever had in his entire life. It's the only thing I can use to shut him up." At that thought, instead

of getting outraged, he smiled.

“I was wondering why did brother Tian come such a long distance to Mount Huashan. Who would have thought that your Master, the little nun Yilin, had sent you to bring two jars of great wine to me, thanking me for finding her such a well-behaved apprentice? Ha-ha, ha-ha!”

Tian Boguang flushed, but soon calmed down. “The two jars of wine are tokens of my own regard. But my coming to Mount Huashan surely is related to Little Sister Yilin,” putting on a serious face, he said.

“Little Sister? No, no, no! Isn’t she your Master now? What a true man says cannot be unsaid. Are you trying to go back on your own words? Apprentice sister Yilin is an outstanding apprentice from a famous school. It was really your good fortune to have found such a Master. Ha-ha!”

Tian Boguang was outraged. He grabbed onto his knife handle and almost drew the knife. But he pulled himself together and spoke coldly.

“Brother Linghu, you don’t have good Kung Fu with your hands, but you surely have outstanding Kung Fu with your tongue.”

“Since I am no match for you in a fight with sword, knife, punches, or kicks, all I can do is to take some petty advantage from you with my tongue, brother Tian.” Linghu Chong grinned.

“In the fight with the tongue, I candidly admit my defeat. Brother Linghu, it’s time for you to come with me now,” Tian Boguang demanded.

“No way! I am not going even if I have to die!” Linghu Chong declared.

“Do you know where I am asking you to go to?” Tian Boguang asked.

“I don’t know and I don’t care. Either to go up the heavens or go down to hell, wherever Tian Boguang goes, Linghu Chong won’t go.”

Tian Boguang shook his head slowly. “Brother Linghu, I am here to invite you to pay a visit to Little Sister Yilin,” he said.

“You rascal, has apprentice sister Yilin fallen into your hands again? How dare

you offend your superior and be so disrespectful to your own Master?" Linghu Chong was shocked.

Tian Boguang yelled angrily, "My Master is someone else. He had passed away many years ago. Don't you ever mix up Little Sister Yilin in this matter again." He paused for a moment to calm himself down and then said, "Brother Linghu, Little Sister Yilin misses you very much. She thinks of you days and nights. I consider you a friend, that's why I will never dare to be disrespectful to her again. You can relax. Shall we go now?"

"I am not going! How many times do I have to repeat myself, one thousand times, ten thousand times?" Linghu Chong claimed.

Tian Boguang showed a slight smile but didn't say a word.

"What are you smiling about? Because your Kung Fu is better than mine, you think you'll just force your will upon me and take me down as a prisoner?" Linghu Chong mocked.

"I have no hostility toward you, brother Linghu, and really don't want to offend you in anyway. But I surely don't want to set out in high spirits and return disappointed."

"Tian Boguang, you have excellent knife skills, and it would be a piece of cake for you to kill me or wound me. You can kill Linghu Chong, but you won't succeed in humiliating Linghu Chong. At most, I'll just let you take away my life, but to take me prisoner so you can take me down Mount Huashan, that's absolutely impossible!"

"I am just doing a favor for someone inviting you to pay a visit to Little Sister Yilin. That's the true and only intention. Why are you so uptight?" Tian Boguang turned his head and eyed Linghu Chong from the corner of his eyes.

"If it's something I don't' want to do, even my Master, Master-Wife, Five Mountains Sword Alliance Chief, or the Emperor himself won't be able to force me, not mentioning you. Here's my final answer: I am not going! Even if I have to say it ten thousand times or one hundred thousand times, the answer is still the same," Linghu Chong said with determination.

“You are too stubborn. I am afraid I’ll have to give offense now.” With a loud clank, Tian Boguang drew his knife.

“You have offended me at the very beginning when you planned to take me prisoner,” Linghu Chong rebuffed angrily. “I guess the ‘Cliff of Contemplation’ on top of Mount Huashan is going to be the place where I depart this life.” He let out a clear roar and also drew his sword.

Tian Boguang took a step back and slightly frowned. “Brother Linghu, we have neither scores to settle nor grudges between the two of us. Why do we have to fight in the expense of our lives? Why don’t we have a bet?”

Linghu Chong secretly felt pleased. He thought to himself, “A bet? That’s perfect! If I lose, I can still argue my way out, even if I have to use some lame excuses.” But instead, he said, “What bet? If I win, I won’t go, and if I lose, I won’t go just the same.”

“I see,” Tian Boguang said with a smile. “The head apprentice of the Huashan Sword School is so scared of Tian Boguang’s fast knife chops, he doesn’t even have the guts to take on thirty knife moves of mine.”

“What am I scared of? What’s the worst, me dying under your blade? So what?” Linghu Chong mocked angrily.

“Brother Linghu, it’s not that I look down upon you or anything, but I am afraid that you won’t be able to fend off even thirty moves of my fast knife chops. As soon as you fend off thirty moves of my fast knife chops, I’ll turn my butt around and get out of here right away. No more babbling. But if I get lucky and beat you within thirty moves, you’ll have to go down Mount Huashan with me and pay a visit to Little Sister Yilin,” Tian Boguang declared.

In the instant, Linghu Chong had gone through Tian Boguang’s knife moves once in his head. He thought, “After the last two fights with him, I’ve pondered over all the powerful techniques of his fast knife chops many times. And on top of that, I’ve also asked Master and Master-Wife about them. If all I need to do is to guard myself so I don’t lose, couldn’t I even fend off thirty moves of his?”

“Fine, I’ll see your thirty moves!” Linghu Chong yelled as he thrust his sword

toward Tian Boguang. He had used an advanced move of the Huashan sword art called Graceful Phoenix right at the beginning. The blade of his sword vibrated and made a buzzing sound as rays of reflection covered Tian Boguang's entire upper body.

"Nice sword move!" Tian Boguang praised as he blocked it with his knife and took a step back.

"That's one!" Linghu Chong shouted out and immediately followed with another attack – Green Pines Welcoming Guest.

"Another nice one!" Tian Boguang praised again.

He knew that there must be numerous additional techniques hidden in the move, so he dared not to fend it off with his knife and simply dodged to the side in a slide. The dodge shouldn't really be counted as a move, but Linghu Chong immediately shouted.

"That's two!"

Before the words even faded, he had already started another attacking move. Soon, Linghu Chong had already launched five attacking moves continuously. Tian Boguang either blocked them or dodged them, never starting his counter-attack, yet Linghu Chong had already counted up to number five. When Linghu Chong started his sixth move by thrusting his sword upward from a lower angle, Tian Boguang gave a loud roar and brought his knife swishing down through the air. The knife and the sword clashed in the midair and Linghu Chong's long sword was knocked down instantly.

"Sixth move, seventh move, eighth move, ninth move, tenth move!" Tian Boguang yelled out.

Every time when he counted one, he would throw a chop at the same time. He counted five moves, and he chopped five times. Every chop swished straight down through the air; he didn't even change his move at all. Each chop landed heavier than the previous one. When the sixth chop came down, Linghu Chong felt that his entire body had been trapped in the energy stream from the blade slicing down and he couldn't even breathe, but he gathered all the strength he

could and blocked upwards anyway. With a loud clank, the knife and the sword smashed into each other. Linghu Chong's arm instantly went numb and the long sword fell from his hand and landed on the ground. Tian Boguang threw another chop. Linghu Chong simply closed his eyes and ignored it.

"How many moves now?" Tian Boguang asked, laughing loudly.

Linghu Chong opened his eyes and answered, "Not only your knife skills are better than mine, your arm strength and inner energy are also way better than mine. Linghu Chong is no match for you."

"Then let's go!" Tian Boguang smiled in triumph.

"Nope. I am not going!" Linghu Chong shook his head again.

"Brother Linghu, I consider you a true man who keeps his own promises. You have lost within thirty moves. Why are you going back on your words?" Tian Boguang pulled a long face.

"At first, I didn't believe that you can beat me within thirty moves. Sure, I have lost, but I never said that I would go with you if I lose to you, did I?" Linghu Chong argued.

Tian Boguang thought that it was really he himself who had said that and Linghu Chong surely never said anything close, so he placed his knife across in front of him and said with a sneer, "There's a character 'Hu' in your name and the name sure fits the person.[60] Ok, you didn't say it, so what?"

"When I lost to you earlier, it was only because you had more strength than me. I am not giving in yet. Let me take a rest, then we can try it again," Linghu Chong said.

"Fine. I'll wait till you admit your loss, yourself." Tian Boguang sat on a rock with his hands on his hips and looked at Linghu Chong with a big smile.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "This villain is insisting on having me leave Mount Huashan. I wonder what kind of evil plan he has. The real reason must have nothing to do with paying a visit to apprentice sister Yilin. He isn't a real student of apprentice sister Yilin, and apprentice sister Yilin would be scared out

of her wit as soon as she sees him, how could she ever maintain contacts with him? But he keeps pestering me at the moment. How can I get out of it?"

He remembered the six chops from Tian Boguang just a minute ago. Those chops had no special techniques to go with them yet the power of the chops was tremendous, and he really had no idea how to fend them off. He suddenly got an idea.

"That night when Great Mr. Mo killed Great Songyang Palm Fei Bin in the remote valley, Great Mr. Mo used the flashy and unpredictable Hengshan style sword art. If I use that to fight Tian Boguang, I am sure I won't lose. There are many deadly moves amount the Hengshan style sword art drawn on the rock wall in the back cave. If I go back there and learn some thirty or forty moves, I should be able to put up a decent fight with Tian Boguang." But then he thought, "Hengshan style sword art is a fine and ingenious sword art. How can I master it in such a short time? Alas, that was just my wishful thinking."

Seeing the fast changing expression on Linghu Chong's face, in one minute being happy, but in the next minute looking totally worried, Tian Boguang grinned.

"Brother Linghu, have you thought of a CUNNING TRICK to defeat my knife moves?"

Hearing that Tian Boguang raising his voice specifically at the words "cunning trick", Linghu Chong's anger rose. "There's no need for any CUNNING TRICKS just to defeat your knife moves. You are being really wordy and annoying here. I can't think well when you keep distracting me like that. I am going to go inside the cave now to think it through. Don't you come and disturb me."

"Fine! You go ahead and think REAL HARD. I won't disturb you." Tian Boguang agreed.

Linghu Chong noticed that Tian raised his voice again at the words "real hard." He cursed in a whisper to himself and entered the cave. He lit a candle and then climbed back into the back cave. Wasting no time, he went straight to

the side of the rock wall with drawings of Hengshan style sword art. Seeing all the different forms of magical and profound sword moves with endless variations, he was dumbfounded. If he hadn't seen them with his own eyes, he would never have believed that such brilliant and fluctuating moves actually existed in the world.

"In such a short time, it's simply impossible for me to learn the sword art well. I'd better pick several of the most unpredictable and weird variation techniques and memorize them well. When I go out again, I'll use them with no specific order whatsoever and fight indiscreetly. Who knows? I might be able to make a surprise attack on him," Linghu Chong thought to himself.

Once decided, he immediately started reading and memorizing. Even though the other figure in the drawings had already defeated every move of the Hengshan sword art, thinking that Tian Boguang would have no chance of knowing any of those techniques, he wasn't worried at all.

He worked on memorizing all the techniques while trying them out with his hands, and after he had learned about twenty or so moves, an hour had already passed. Tian Boguang's voice rose from outside the cave.

"Brother Linghu, if you don't come out, I am going to charge in now."

Linghu Chong leapt out with his sword in his hand and shouted, "Fine! Let me take another thirty moves of yours!"

"So brother Linghu, what if you lose again this time?" Tian Boguang asked with a beam.

"At least it wouldn't be the first loss for me. Just one more loss, no big deal!"

Before he even finished talking, he had already launched a storm of attacks with seven continuous moves. All those seven moves were ones he had newly learned from the rock wall in the back cave, and all of them were fluctuating and unpredictable to the extreme.

Tian Boguang had not expected such unpredictable variations from Huashan style sword art. Caught in a surprise, he had to take one step back after another.

When it was the tenth move, still being greatly amazed, he roared loudly and waved his knife to start his counter attack. He had great strength with his knife chops, which prevented Linghu Chong from executing many of the variations in his sword moves. At the nineteenth move, the two weapons clashed, and Linghu Chong's long sword was once again knocked out of his grip.

Linghu Chong leapt two steps to the side and shouted, "Brother Tian, you only have stronger arms than me. You didn't win with your knife moves. I am still not convinced this time. Let me figure out another thirty sword moves and then I'll fight you again."

"Your Master is still a hundred and fifty miles away at this very moment, searching for traces of me. He probably won't make it back to Mount Huashan for another ten to fifteen days. This delaying strategy of yours is not gonna work," Tian Boguang said with a smirk.

"Who said that I have to rely on my Master to take care of you? I just recovered from my illness and am very weak in my strength, that's how you got the advantage. If we are only comparing our moves, you think I can't even block thirty moves of yours? I don't think so!"

"I am not going to fall for you again. Either I win by knife moves or by arm strength, a win is a win and a loss is a loss. What good does it do to find all the excuses?" Tian Boguang disagreed.

"Fine! You wait for me here. Be a true man. Don't you get scared and decide to run away. But if you do, I won't be chasing after you!" Linghu Chong said.

Tian Boguang burst into loud laughter. He took two steps back and sat on a big rock.

Linghu Chong went back into the back cave. He figured, "Tian Boguang has fought Priest Tian-Song of the Taishan Sword School before, and also wounded him quite good. He has also fought with apprentice sister Yilin of the Heng-Shan Sword School. And I just fought him using the Hengshan style sword art. He probably doesn't know anything about the Songshan style sword art."

He found the drawings of the Songshan Sword School's sword moves and

learned about ten moves or so. “I still have over ten Hengshan style lethal moves that I didn’t have a chance to use earlier,” he thought to himself. “If I mix them up in Songshan style sword art moves and then use several moves of my own sword school all of a sudden, I might be able to really confuse the hell out of him.”

He didn’t even wait for Tian Boguang to call for him, and rushed straight into the fight as soon as he went out of the cave. The sword moves he used would be a minute in Songshan style, the next minute in Hengshan style, with Huashan style deadly moves mixed up in between.

“Weird! This is so weird!” Tian Boguang kept yelling out loud. But on the twenty-second move, he was still able to place the blade of his knife right next to Linghu Chong’s neck and forced him to throw down his sword.

“In the first time, I was only able to take on five moves of yours. But after I thought about it for a little while, I was able to take on eighteen moves of yours. After thinking for another while, I was already able to take on twenty-one moves of yours. Brother Tian, aren’t you a bit scared by now?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Why should I be scared?” Tian Boguang beamed.

“If I keep pondering over it and think a couple more times, I will then be able to take on thirty of your moves. And after thinking some more, I will be able to turn the tide and claim victory. Even if I decide to not kill you, wouldn’t it be terrible for you?” Linghu Chong deduced.

“I have been wandering around the Martial World for many years, and brother Linghu, you are certainly the smartest one out of all the adversaries I ever had. It’s a pity that your Kung Fu is still a good deal far too lower than mine. Say that you can progress really fast, but it would still be impossible for you to defeat me within hours.” Tian Boguang claimed.

“Brother Tian, you are certainly the most reckless one out of all the adversaries I ever had. Seeing that Linghu Chong is getting stronger and stronger in the fights, yet you still decide not to run away. It’s so rare. Brother Tian, if you’ll

excuse me, I am going to go inside to think a bit more."

"Help yourself!" Tian Boguang only grinned.

Linghu Chong walked in the cave slowly. Although he had been raving with Tian Boguang as if he had nothing to worry about, in his heart, he was actually getting more and more worried. "This villain must have come to Mount Huashan with evil plans. He knows very well that Master and Master-Wife went after him in the hope to get rid of him, why would he still have leisure time to have the contests with me? After he took me prisoner each time, even if he doesn't want to kill me, he should at least have sealed my acupoints to restrict me from moving about. Why did he let me go free again and again? What does he want?"

He was determined that Tian Boguang must have come to Mount Huashan with a terrifying evil plot, but he had no clue what the plot might be. "Could it be that he wanted to keep me here so somebody else can take care of all my apprentice brothers and sisters? But why doesn't he simply kill me right away? Wouldn't that be a lot easier?" he couldn't help but ask himself.

He thought for quite a while and finally jumped up onto his feet, thinking, "No matter what, it appears that our Huashan Sword School is in great danger today. Master and Master-Wife are not home, and I am the head of the sword school right now. I'll have to carry the heavy burden all by myself. Despite whatever Tian Boguang's purpose is, I must use all my brain to keep pestering him, and if there's ever an opportunity that I can take advantage of him, I should kill him without hesitation."

After making up his mind, he went on studying the drawings on the rock wall, but this time he intentionally picked the fiercest and most vicious and fatal moves to memorize. By the time he walked out of the cave, it was daybreak the next day already. Although Linghu Chong had the intent to kill, his face looked very relaxed.

"Brother Tian, you have come to Mount Huashan as a guest, and I am so sorry that I haven't really fulfilled my duty as a host. After this contest, regardless of who wins and who loses, I'll invite you to try out some of our local products,"

Linghu Chong suggested.

"Thanks a lot!" Tian Boguang smiled.

"But when we meet again down Mount Huashan in the future, we would still be fighting for our lives. Nothing will be like today's polite contest with counted moves ever again," Linghu Chong declared.

"It would be a real pity to kill the kind of friend like you, brother Linghu. But if I don't kill you, your Kung Fu would progress too fast and one day when your skills are better than mine, you probably wouldn't let me, the evil rapist, go easily," Tian Boguang said.

"Precisely. It is such a rare opportunity for us to swap pointers in Kung Fu like today. Brother Tian, I am going to attack now. Will you please give me some advice?"

"You flatter me! Brother Linghu, please!" Tian Boguang said courteously.

"The more I think about it, the more I feel that I am no match for you, brother Tian," Linghu Chong said with a big smile.

Before he even finished the sentence, he had already thrust his sword forward. By the time his sword tip was about three feet from Tian Boguang's body, the sword went toward the left side and then turned into a sudden side stab. Tian Boguang raised his knife and blocked. Not waiting for the sword blade to clash with the knife blade, Linghu Chong suddenly slashed up from Tian's crouch. This move was both sinister and fierce to the extreme. Tian Boguang was astounded and immediately jumped back. Linghu Chong followed the initiative and thrust out three attacks, each one heading toward Tian Boguang's vital parts with all his might. Losing the initiative, Tian Boguang found himself in disadvantage and had to block left and right with his knife. A tearing sound rose as Linghu Chong's long sword penetrated his pants right next to his right leg, leaving a hole in his pants. The fast sword thrust landed only a mere inch from his leg.

Tian Boguang threw a punch with his right fist, which knocked Linghu Chong rolling on the ground. "Every move of yours is aimed at killing me. What kind

of swapping pointers is that?" he yelled in rage.

"Well, no matter how hard I try, I still wouldn't stand a chance even harming a hair of yours. You surely have a lot of strength with your left fist." Linghu Chong leapt back onto his feet.

"Sorry for that!" Tian Boguang said.

"I think you broke two of my ribs." Linghu Chong stepped forward with a big smile on his face.

As he got closer, all of a sudden, he passed the sword to his left hand and thrust it out backward in a flash. This unimaginably queer move turned out to be a deadly move of the Heng-Shan Sword School. In immense astonishment, Tian Boguang found the sword tip only inches from his lower stomach. In a great hurry he rolled onto the ground and was able to barely dodge it. Occupying the commanding position, Linghu Chong continued with four more thrusts, which put Tian Boguang in an extremely awkward position. It almost looked as if within a couple more moves, Linghu Chong would succeed nailing Tian on the ground with his sword. But unexpectedly, Tian Boguang threw a kick with his left foot all of a sudden, which landed on Linghu Chong's wrist. He then instantly followed with another kick, his right foot striking Linghu Chong's stomach heavily. Linghu Chong could no longer hold on to his sword. The sword flew out of his grip as he fell down to the ground facing up. Tian Boguang leapt up and rushed forward, placing his blade right on Linghu Chong's throat.

"Very sinister sword moves indeed! I almost got killed. Are you convinced yet?" Tian Boguang sneered.

"Of course not! We agreed to a contest between my sword moves and your knife chops. Didn't you just use your fists and legs to throw punches and kicks at me? How should we count the moves now?"

"Even if we count the punches and kicks, it is still less than thirty moves." Tian Boguang moved his blade away and said with a sneer.

Linghu Chong stood up and said angrily, "You beat me within thirty moves.

You have excellent Kung Fu. So what? If you want to kill me, then kill me, why are you laughing at me? If you want to laugh, then laugh. Why are you sneering?"

Tian Boguang took a step back. "Brother Linghu, you have a good accusation. Yes, I am wrong." He cupped his hands and said, "I apologize sincerely. Will you, brother Linghu, please forgive me?"

Linghu Chong was struck dumb. Tian Boguang just had a brilliant victory, yet he was willing to apologize. That's far from what Linghu Chong had expected. So he too cupped his hands and saluted back.

"That's quite alright!" he said as he pondered upon the question, "When someone shows great courtesy to his inferior, he must have his purpose. I wonder why he is treating me with such great respect."

He pondered over the question but still couldn't figure it out, so he decided to simply ask about it straight forth.

"Brother Tian, I have a question in my mind. Will you give me a straight answer?" he asked.

"I have no problem telling anything to anyone. For things like raping and looting, murdering and arson, others might try to hide or deny them. When I, Tian Boguang, want to do something, I'll do it and admit to it! Why bother denying it?" Tian Boguang declared.

"Then, brother Tian, you are really an open and aboveboard true man," Linghu Chong commented.

"A true man? You are really flattering me. But at least I am an honest villain whose deeds match his words." Tian Boguang said.

"Aha, brother Tian, people of your type are really rare in the Martial World. Will you please answer this question for me? You had planned carefully to lure my Master far away from Mount Huashan, and then you came to Mount Huashan and insisted on having me leave together with you. Where on earth do you want me to go and what's your purpose?"

“I’ve told you right at the beginning that I am here to invite you to pay a visit to Little Sister Yilin so she won’t be hurting from lovesickness.”

“That is just so too absurd and bizarre. I am not a three-year old kid. How can I believe you?” Linghu Chong shook his head.

Tian Boguang was enraged. “I consider you a true hero, but you are treating me like I am the shameless low life scoundrel. Why can’t you trust my words? Are you thinking that all the words that are coming out of my mouth are just crap? If there were anything untrue in my words, I would be even lower than a filthy pig,” he snapped.

Feeling the sincerity in his words, Linghu Chong had to believe in him, and at the meantime, he was totally amazed. “Brother Tian, your submitting to become Little Sister Yilin’s apprentice was just a joke, not to be taken seriously. Why did you come such a long way to invite me for her sake?” he asked in disbelief.

“Of course there are other reasons involved. Just with her little Kung Fu, how could she ever be worthy to be my Master?” Tian Boguang looked quite embarrassed.

Linghu Chong suddenly got an idea. He thought to himself, “Could it be possible that Tian Boguang has fallen in love with apprentice sister Yilin, and all his previous ill intention has transformed into deep affection?”

“Have you fallen in love with Little Sister Yilin at first sight and are most willing to do what she tells you?” Linghu Chong asked.

“You can stop imagining things. There’s nothing even close to that!” Tian Boguang shook his head.

“Then what are the other reasons involved? Brother Tian, will you please share those with me?” Linghu Chong demanded.

“This is the worst luck for me. Why ask so much? In short, if I can’t invite you down Mount Huashan, I will die a dreadful death,” Tian Boguang answered.

“How could that be possible?” Linghu Chong was shocked, yet he didn’t even bat an eyelid.

“Tian Boguang pushed up his clothes and exposed his chest. Pointing at two red spots as big as a coin right below his two nipples, he exclaimed, “Somebody has sealed my Death Acupoints here and also planted strong poison in my body so he can force me to come and invite you to pay a visit to the Little Sister. If I fail to accomplish the mission, then the two red spots will start to deteriorate and fester. By then, there will be no cure whatsoever and they will gradually expand all over my body until my entire body starts to decompose. After three years and six months I will eventually die because of the rotting.”

With a very serious look on his face, he spoke again, “Brother Linghu, I am telling you the truth not because I want to earn your pity or anything. I just want you to know that no matter how persistent you are, I am determined to have you comply. I am open at all options at all cost. On normal days, I already stop at no evil. At a life-threatening moment like this, I would have no scruples.”

“It seems like he is telling the truth,” Linghu Chong thought to himself. “Then all I need to do is to not go down Mount Huashan with him. A month later when the poison in his body activates, the world will be rid of a big villain. There is really no need to kill him myself.” So he said to Tian Boguang with a smile, “Which elite master was so mischievous to have done such a practical joke and gave you such a puzzle to solve? I wonder what kind of poison was planted in your body. Even the most dangerous poison can be detoxified somehow.”

“There’s no need to mention the one who sealed my Death Acupoints and planted poison in me. Other than the one who did it, there’s only one other person in the entire world who might be able to detoxify the poison in my Death Acupoints – ‘Killer Doctor’ Ping One-Finger. But why would he want to work on me?” Tian Boguang said irritably.

“You can either beg him with polite words or threaten him with your knife on his neck. Maybe he might consider working on you,” Linghu Chong said with a small grin.

“You can save all your sarcasm to yourself. In brief, if I can’t get you to go with me, then I will be dead for sure, but you won’t be able to stay safe either.”

“Of course! Brother Tian, all you need is to beat me fair and square and make me feel sincerely convinced. Then in consideration of your great Kung Fu skills that took you quite some hard work to master, I might just agree to go down Mount Huashan with you. Will you please wait for me a bit more? I am going to enter the cave to think again.

He entered the cave, thinking to himself, “That day when I fought with him for several times, I was able to fight over thirty moves every time. How come I’ve actually slipped back now and simply can’t take thirty of his moves any more?” Soon, he figured it out. “That’s right! That day when I fought with him, ready to die any moment, I never cared if it was thirty moves or forty moves. Right now I keep counting the first move, the second move, the third move. All I care about is how to take on the full set of thirty moves. With such distraction, then inevitably my sword skill is only half good compared to the last time. Linghu Chong, Linghu Chong! How dumb you are!”

After figuring the problem out, he was greatly encouraged and went on to study the Kung Fu on the rock wall. This time he focused on Taishan style sword art. Taishan style sword art was distinctively strong in its stableness and steadiness. Within such a short time, it would be impossible to truly grasp the essence of it. Besides, Linghu Chong wasn’t too fond of the rigorous and well-behaved sword style either. He looked at the moves for a little while and was ready to leave when the nimble and agile moves of a short spear used to break Taishan style sword art caught his eyes. The more he studied them, the more fascinated he became, and soon he was so focused in it that he lost track of time, until Tian Boguang became impatient about the waiting and called him.

The two fought again. By then Linghu Chong became a little bit wiser and never bothered to count the moves again. As soon as the fight broke out, he waved his sword in different directions and launched a storm of attacks upon Tian Boguang. Seeing new sword moves emerging out of Linghu Chong in an endless stream and that every time after he thought about it in the cave, he would add many new meanings to the moves, Tian Boguang dared not to slack off. The two countered fast with faster, and exchanged many moves within a

short moment. Suddenly Tian Boguang took a step forward, reaching out and grabbed onto Linghu Chong's wrist in the speed of a flash. He twisted Linghu Chong's arm back and pointed the sword tip right at Linghu Chong's throat. If he had wanted to, he could have pushed the sword forward and the long sword would have penetrated Linghu Chong's throat.

"You lost!" Tian Boguang yelled out.

"It was you. You lost!" Linghu Chong claimed as great pain came from his wrist.

"How did I lose?" Tian Boguang asked.

"This is the thirty-second move." Linghu Chong declared.

"Thirty-second move?" Tian Boguang asked in disbelief.

"Yep! Thirty-second move, precisely." Linghu Chong acknowledged.

"You weren't counting." Tian Boguang didn't buy it.

"Well, I wasn't counting with my tongue, but I was counting in my heart. It was plain and clear. This is the thirty-second move." Linghu Chong affirmed.

Actually he never really counted in his heart. The thirty-second move thing was just something he made up on the spot.

"That can't be true!" Tian Boguang let go of Linghu Chong's wrist and argued. "You thrust like this with your first move and I counter-attacked like this. You then blocked it like this and I chopped like this. That was the second move." He went on and on and was actually able to demonstrate every single move used in the last fight from the very beginning to the very end. After he counted till the move when he grabbed onto Linghu Chong's wrist, it was only the twenty-eighth move.

Linghu Chong was immensely amazed at Tian Boguang's ability in memorizing. The two of them had both fought with tremendous speed, yet he was able to memorize every single move so clearly in the exact order. That's some kind of talent one simply wouldn't see very often in the Martial World. Linghu Chong couldn't help but admire. He stuck his thumb out.

“Brother Tian, you have superb memory! I must have counted wrong. Let me go to think them over again.”

“Wait!” Tian Boguang stopped him. “Something is really odd about this cave. I’d like to go in and take a look. Are there secret Kung Fu manuscripts hidden in the cave? Why is it that every time after you come out of the cave, you add many strange moves to your collection?” He started walking toward the cave.

Linghu Chong was stunned. He thought quickly, “If he finds out about the drawings on the rock wall, it would be disastrous.” He immediately showed a brief trace of happiness on his face and soon replaced it with a sad and worried look as he extended his arms out to block Tian Boguang’s way.

“We have our school’s secret Kung Fu manuscripts in the cave. Brother Tian, you are not a member of our Huashan Sword School. You can’t go in there to tour around. Sorry!”

Noticing the very brief happy look on Linghu Chong’s face that was quickly replaced by some kind of very exaggerated worried look, probably something he put out as a show, Tian Boguang pondered, “Why was he so happy as soon as he heard that I wanted to go in the cave? He pretended to be worried immediately afterwards. Obviously he was trying the hide his true feelings and hoped that I would rush into the cave recklessly. There must be something in that cave that would be detrimental to me. Probably some kind of booby-trap or ambush. Or maybe some kind of poisonous serpent or monster he has tamed. I am not going to fall for it!”

“I see. So there are secret Kung Fu manuscripts of your respected school. Then it wouldn’t be appropriate for me to go tour around indeed,” Tian Boguang pretended to agree.

Linghu Chong shook his head and appeared to be very disappointed. Later, he went back in the cave several more times and learned many more strange and weird moves, not only unique moves of the Five Mountains sword schools, but also many of those odd moves that would break the sword arts of the Five Mountains sword schools. But in the rush, he couldn’t truly understand the

essence of them, and because he had used them right after he picked them up minutes ago, their power was dramatically reduced and he still couldn't take on thirty moves of Tian Boguang's fast knife chops.

Tian Boguang couldn't understand why every time after Linghu Chong entered the cave to think more, he would be able to perform many odd and strange moves. Those odd and strange moves weren't really very useful in countering his own knife moves, but they were all so clever and brilliant that he had never seen anything like them in his entire life. It was almost like an amazing demonstration, and he secretly wished that the contest would go on so he would be able to observe more of the fantastic sword moves.

After Tian Boguang subdued Linghu Chong another time, noticing that it had already passed noon, he suddenly thought of something. "Most of the moves he used this time seemed to have been moves of Songshan style sword art. Could it be possible that there are elite grandmasters of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance hiding in that cave? Every time when he goes into that cave, those elite grandmasters would then teach him some new moves and then send him out to fight me. Oops, luckily I didn't rush in that cave recklessly. How can I stand a chance fighting the many elite grandmasters of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance?" At that thought, he blurted out.

"Why don't they come out?"

"Who?" Linghu Chong asked.

"Those elite senior grandmasters in the cave who taught you all those sword moves," Tian Boguang answered.

Linghu Chong was taken by surprise, but then immediately understood what Tian Boguang meant. He let out a big smile.

"Those senior grandmasters, they don't…don't feel like fighting you, brother Tian."

Tian Boguang was outraged. He gave a very disgruntled snort and then yelled out loudly, "I know these kinds of people. They fish for fame and compliments and profess to be above politics and worldly considerations. They feel it's

beneath their dignity to fight me, the evil rapist Tian Boguang. You let them out. As long as we are fighting one on one, regardless of how big of a reputation he has, he might not be able to beat me!"

"Brother Tian, if you are interested, go ahead and enter the cave to consult those eleven senior grandmasters. They actually think your knife skills are quite excellent," Linghu Chong shook his head and said with a grin.

Linghu Chong knew that hence Tian Boguang had committed many crimes in the Martial World and had made many enemies, he had always been very careful in normal days. Now since he has assumed that there are elite masters from various schools in the cave, he would never risk going in the cave no matter how he was goaded. He intentionally used such an odd number eleven instead of ten to make it sound real.

Surely enough, Tian Boguang snorted and said, "What elite senior grandmasters? I am afraid they are all the ones with underserved reputation, otherwise, why after teaching you all kinds of moves again and again, you still can't even take on thirty moves of mine?"

He was quite confident about his Qing-Gong skills and thought that even if those eleven elite masters all rushed out at the same time, although he wouldn't stand a chance winning the fight, at least he would stand a very good chance of running away successfully. And besides, because all of them were elite senior grandmasters of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, they would value their own dignity dearly and never launch a joint attack at him.

Linghu Chong put on a serious face. "That's only because I am dumb and clumsy with very limited inner energy and couldn't grasp the essence of those senior grandmasters' Kung Fu. Brother Tian, you'd better watch your mouth and not upset them. If any one of them decided to fight you, you don't even have to wait for your poison to activate a month from now; your head would be missing from your neck on top of the 'Cliff of Contemplation' instantly."

"Why don't you tell me who those senior grandmasters are in the cave?" Tian Boguang demanded.

“Those senior grandmasters have lived in seclusion and lived a hermit’s life for a long time already. They have withdrawn from society for many years. Their gathering here has nothing to do with you, brother Tian. Their names can’t be revealed. But even if I do tell you who they are, you wouldn’t have heard of their names anyways. There’s no need to tell! No need to tell!” Linghu Chong had a very secretive look on his face.

Seeing the odd expression on Linghu Chong’s face, Tian Boguang was almost sure that Linghu Chong was trying to hide the truth. So he said, “Within Songshan, Taishan, Hengshan, and Heng-Shan the four schools, there may be some exceptional senior grandmasters. But in your respectful school though, there isn’t any grandmasters left at all. Everybody knows about that in the Martial World. You must be talking irresponsibly and making things up. It’s hard for me to believe you.”

“That’s right. There really isn’t any elite senior grandmaster left in the Huashan Sword School. Many years ago, our sword school was so unfortunately hit by plagues, and all the elite fighters in the last generation withered and passed away. Brother Tian, you have said it correctly. There is really no grandmaster of our Huashan Sword School in the cave.” Linghu Chong affirmed.

Tian Boguang was convinced that Linghu Chong must have been lying to him. When he said something is false, then it should be true. If he had said that there weren’t any senior grandmasters left in Huashan Sword School, then there must be someone. He pondered over it for a long time and suddenly remembered something. He slapped his thigh with his palm and shouted out loud.

“Aha! I remember now! So it is senior grandmaster Feng Qingyang!”

Linghu Chong instantly remembered the characters “Feng Qingyang” carved on the rock wall in the cave and couldn’t help but utter a cry of surprise. He wasn’t pretending this time and was stunned when he thought that the senior grandmaster Feng might still be alive. Regardless of what the truth was, he waved his hand in denial hurriedly.

“Brother Tian, please don’t talk irresponsibly. Feng…Feng….”

He figured that since the name “Feng Qingyang” has a “Qing” character in it, then he must be from a more senior generation than Master’s “Bu” generation. So he continued with his sentence.

“Grand Uncle-Master Feng has quit the Martial World to live in seclusion many, many years ago. Nobody knows where he is, and no one is even sure that the respectful Grand Uncle-Master is still alive or not. How can he be on Mount Huashan right now? If you don’t believe me, then you’d better go in the cave and take a look yourself, then you will know the truth.”

The more Linghu Chong wanted Tian Boguang to go in the cave, the more Tian Boguang believed that it was a trap. He thought to himself, “He looks so panic-stricken. I must have figured it out right. I heard that many of the senior Huashan Sword School grandmasters all died unusual deaths in a single night except Feng Qingyang who happened to be away from Mount Huashan at the time and escaped that doom. So it turned out he is still alive. But he would be at least somewhere between seventy and eighty years old. No matter how high his Kung Fu level is at, he would have exhausted his strengths after all. The hell with him. Why would I be afraid of such an rotten old man?”

At that thought, he said to Linghu Chong, “Brother Linghu, we have already fought an entire day and an entire night. Even if we keep fighting, you wouldn’t stand a chance beating me. Although you have your Grand Uncle-Master Feng to give you pointers continuously, it’s useless after all. Why don’t you just behave yourself and follow me down Mount Huashan?”

Before Linghu Chong had a chance to answer, a cold voice suddenly rose from behind his back.

“If I had really given him some pointers, you don’t think he can even take care of a chap like you? I doubt that!”

Chapter 10: Sword Training

Translated by Lanny Lin



The old man nodded, let out a sigh, and then slowly walked to the front of the big rock to sit down. Tian Boguang yelled, "Here's the chop!" and then slashed his knife at Linghu Chong. Linghu Chong turned to the side to dodge and then fought back with a thrust.

Linghu Chong was thunderstruck. He turned around and saw an old man with a gray beard in a green robe standing in front of the cave's opening. The old man had a somewhat depressed expression on his face, which was as white as a

sheet.

"Could this old man be the masked man in green robe I saw the other night? Where is he from? When did he come right behind my back? How come I didn't feel a thing and had no idea about it?" He couldn't help but feel bewildered.

"Are you…are you really Grandmaster Feng?" Tian Boguang asked in a trembling tone.

"It has gotten to be rare for people in this world to still remember my name." The old man heaved a sigh.

In the instant, many thoughts flashed through Linghu Chong's mind. "There is still a senior grandmaster of our Huashan Sword School alive today? Why haven't I ever heard Master or Master-Wife mentioning anything about it? What if he is just an imposter who took the opportunity from Tian Boguang's words? Wouldn't everyone in the Martial World laugh at our Huashan Sword School if I recklessly salute him as a junior? Besides, what a big coincidence is this? As soon as Tian Boguang mentioned the name 'Feng Qingyang,' a 'Feng Qingyang' suddenly shows up right away?"

"Linghu Chong, what an useless lad you are!" The old man shook his head with another sigh. "Let me teach you. Use the move White Aurora Shooting the Sun first and follow up with Graceful Phoenix, then use Golden Geese Crossing Sky followed with Sword Interception Stance…." He talked on and on in a flow of eloquence and soon mentioned the names of thirty different moves.

Linghu Chong had learned all the thirty moves before, but the sword positions and the stances of those moves didn't seem to connect at all.

"What are you waiting for? Oh, I see. With your current understanding of martial arts, it isn't easy to just perform all thirty of them at once, indeed. Why don't you try them out slowly, first?" The old man instructed.

His voice was low and deep, and his face looked desolate. It almost appeared as if he had infinite grievance, yet there was a certain majestic feel in his tone.

"Well, there's nothing to lose if I give it a try," Linghu Chong thought to

himself.

So he performed the White Aurora Shooting the Sun move and thrust his sword with the sword tip pointing up. Then he got stuck, having no clue how to connect the second move Graceful Phoenix to it.

“Alas! Idiot! Idiot! Only able to rigidly adhering to formalities with no adaptation, no wonder you are an apprentice of Yue Buqun. The art of swordplay calls for fluency like floating clouds and flowing water – natural and smooth, come and go freely. After you finished the move White Aurora Shooting the Sun and had your sword tip pointing up, couldn’t you just follow the flow and slash it downwards? Even though there’s no such posture in the move, why can’t you adapt to the flow and make it more convenient for yourself?”

The words struck Linghu Chong’s ears like bell rings and woke him. Slightly pulling the sword back with a slash, he naturally transformed it into the move Graceful Phoenix. Before it was entirely done, he had already changed it again and smoothly transformed it into the move Golden Geese Crossing the Sky. The long sword swished across above his head, and then with a hook and a jab, it easily turned into Sword Interception Stance – all the connections and transformations appeared to be smooth and flawless. With the ease of mind, he continued performing one move after another following the old man’s instruction. By the time he stopped at the move Ringing Bells and Drums, it was exactly a total of thirty moves. All of a sudden, Linghu Chong felt indescribable joy. On the old man’s face, however, there was no trace of approval whatsoever.

“You got them connected alright, but see how stiff and rigid they are, also very clumsy. Even though you are still far from capable of fighting a master hand, it would be enough to deal with that little chap over there. Go ahead and try them out on him!” he demanded.

Linghu Chong still didn’t quite believe that the old man was his Grand Uncle-Master, but he was quite convinced that the old man had to be an elite Kung Fu master. His sword pointing down at the ground, he bowed to salute to the old man, then turned to face Tian Boguang.

“Brother Tian, please go ahead!”

“I’ve seen you perform all thirty moves. What’s there to fight about?” Tian Boguang questioned.

“If brother Tian doesn’t want to fight, that’s totally alright. Will you please leave now? I’d like to ask for some more advice from this senior master here. Sorry, can’t be your company now,” Linghu Chong said.

“What are you talking about? Do you expect me to just die for nothing only because you don’t want to go down Mount Huashan with me?” Tian Boguang objected loudly. He turned to the old man.

“Grandmaster Feng, Tian Boguang is only a junior here. I am not worthy to exchange moves with you, the respectful one. If you join in the fight, it would really be beneath your dignity.”

The old man nodded his approval with another sigh. He slowly walked by a big rock and sat down.

Tian Boguang felt great relief. “Look out!” he yelled and brought his knife swishing down upon Linghu Chong’s head.

Linghu Chong dodged to the side and stabbed back with his long sword. The move was the fourth move Sword Interception Stance the old man had told him earlier. Once starting his attack, he poured out many continuous moves with ease. Some of the moves he used were among the ones named by the old man, and some were outside of those thirty moves the old man had told him. Since he had comprehended the essence of the phrase “floating clouds and flowing water – natural and smooth, come and go freely,” his sword skills improved dramatically, and the fight went on well over a hundred moves.

All of a sudden, Tian Boguang roared loudly and chopped straight down. Knowing that it would be very difficult to dodge out of that one in time, Linghu Chong snapped his wrist and pointed his long sword toward Tian Boguang’s chest. Tian Boguang turned his knife around and smacked it at the sword. “Clank,” the knife and the sword clashed. Tian Boguang didn’t wait for Linghu Chong to pull back his sword. He simply let go of his own knife and jumped

forward. Reaching out with his two hands, he seized Linghu Chong's throat in a strangle hold. Linghu Chong was almost suffocated. In the rush, he dropped his long sword as well.

"If you don't come with me, your old man here will choke you to death." Tian Boguang yelled out.

He had been calling Linghu Chong a brother earlier with a very respectful tone. After the fierce fight of over a hundred moves, he really lost his temper and started calling himself Linghu Chong's "old man" after he seized Linghu Chong's throat.

Not able to breathe, Linghu Chong still shook his head as his face went purple from the choking.

"One hundred moves or two hundred moves, it doesn't matter. As long as I am winning, you'll have to go down Mount Huashan with me. The hell with the bet on the thirty moves thing. Your old man I don't care!" Tian Boguang cursed between his teeth.

Linghu Chong wanted to laugh, but with Tian Boguang's hands choking onto his throat hard, he couldn't make any sound.

"You idiot! Your finger can be used as a sword, too. Do you absolutely have to use a real sword for that Treasures All Over the Room move?" The old man reproved.

Those words worked the magic as a flash lighted in Linghu Chong's mind. He thrust out with his right hand and used the move Treasures All Over the Room. His middle finger and index finger struck the Tan-Zhong Acupoint on Tian Boguang's chest in a jab; Tian Boguang uttered a muffled groan and collapsed onto the ground, his hands letting go of Linghu Chong's throat.

Linghu Chong had no idea that such a casual jab would actually subdue the "Ten Thousand Miles Loner" Tian Boguang, a man who enjoyed great fame for his Kung Fu skills in the martial world, in such an easy manner. He gently rubbed his own throat, which was still hurting uncomfortably from Tian Boguang's choking, and then looked down at the evil rapist, who laid on the

ground huddled up, twitching involuntarily. Seeing Tian Boguang showing the whites of his eyes and having lost his consciousness, Linghu Chong found himself deeply amazed and overjoyed. Instantly, he felt tremendous admiration toward the old man. Rushing by the old man's side, he knelt down and kowtowed.

"Grand Uncle-Master! Will you please pardon me! I have treated you with such disrespect."

"You don't think I am just swindling and bluffing now?" The old man let out a slight smile.

"I dare not! Grandmaster Feng, I am so fortunate to be able to meet a senior grandmaster of our school! This is so marvelous." He kowtowed more.

"You can get up now," the old man Feng Qingyang said.

Only after another three respectful kowtows, Linghu Chong stood up. Noticing that the old man had a very pale and pallid complexion, looking wan and sallow, he asked, "Grand Uncle-Master, are you hungry? I have some food in the cave. Let me go get them." He turned around and headed toward the cave.

"No need for that!" Feng Qingyang shook his head.

He squinted at the sun and then murmured, "The sunshine is so warm! It has been a long time since I last basked in the wonderful sunshine."

Linghu Chong was taken by surprise, but he dared not ask.

Feng Qingyang threw a glance at the huddled up Tian Boguang on the ground. "You have jabbed onto his Tan-Zhong Acupoint," he said. "With his mastery of martial arts skills, he will probably regain his consciousness in two hours. By then, he'll start another round of harassing. Once you beat him one more time, he would have no choice but to behave and leave. After you subdue him, you must force him to swear a deadly oath that he would never mention to anyone that he had seen me."

"When I won earlier, it was only because I got lucky and took him by surprise. I am still no match for him with my sword skills. To be able to subdue him…

subdue him…," Linghu Chong murmured.

Feng Qingyang shook his head. "You are Yue Buqun's apprentice. I really shouldn't teach you any Kung Fu. That day…that day…I swore an oath that I would never fight anyone in the remaining of my life. When I demonstrated the sword moves to you the other night, I just wanted to let you know that if one executes the Huashan Sword School's Nineteen Stances of the Jade Maiden Sword the right way, how can anyone ever flick the sword out of your grip? I suppose if I don't make you do the work, I won't be able to force a deadly oath out of Tian Boguang, promising not to let out the secret. You, follow me."

Feng Qingyang walked in the cave and entered the back cave through the hole on the rock wall. Linghu Chong followed in behind him.

"You have studied and memorized all those drawings of Huashan style sword art on the rock wall. When you used them though, they were all totally off. Alas!" Feng Qingyang pointed at the rock wall and shook his head.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "So when I was studying those drawings here during those many times, Grand Uncle-Master had been watching me. I guess every time I was simply too focused in studying and didn't even notice that someone else was actually in the cave as well. If…if Grand Uncle-Master had been an enemy…hmm, if he were an enemy, even if I had found out about it, would I then have any chance of surviving?"

"The chap Yue Buqun is a total moron. You are very good apprentice material, but he turned you into a dumb fool with his teaching." Feng Qingyang continued.

Hearing Feng Qingyang's humiliating words to his respectful Master, Linghu Chong was very displeased.

"Grand Uncle-Master, I don't want you to teach me any more. I'll just go outside and force Tian Boguang to swear the oath, promising that he will never let out Grand Uncle-Master's secret," he said in a bold tone.

Feng Qingyang was seized by surprise, but it only took him an instant to understand the reason behind. "What if he won't agree? Are you going to kill

him?" he asked dryly.

Linghu Chong hesitated and didn't know how to answer. He thought that since Tian Boguang had never intended to kill him even when he won the many fights, how could he himself be so cruel to kill Tian Boguang immediately after he got the upper hand?

"You are blaming me for swearing at your Master, aren't you? Fine. I won't mention his name any more. He calls me Uncle-Master. It should be alright for me to call him a 'chap,' shouldn't it?" Feng Qingyang asked.

"Grand Uncle-Master, if you stop scolding my respectful Master, of course I will listen to your advice cautiously," Linghu Chong replied.

"This is almost like I am begging you to learn from me." Feng Qingyang was amused.

"I dare not. Grand Uncle-Master, I beg for your pardon." Linghu Chong bowed.

Feng Qingyang pointed at the drawings of the Huashan style sword art on the rock wall and started explaining.

"These moves are indeed the unique moves among our school's sword arts. Most of them have long been lost, and even Yue…Yue…hmm…even your Master doesn't know them. Even though they are brilliant moves, when you use them one move at a time, others would still be able to overcome them…."

Hearing these words, Linghu Chong felt a sudden inspiration and vaguely understood an ultimate principle of sword art. He couldn't help but show a wild, joyful face.

"What have you figured out? Tell me about it." Feng Qingyang requested.

"Grand Uncle-Master, are you saying that if all the moves become an integral whole, then the enemy would have no way of breaking them?" Linghu Chong stated.

"Didn't I say that you are good material? You have very good comprehension." Feng Qingyang nodded happily. "Those Demon Cult

Elders….” He pointed at the staff-wielding figure on the rock wall as he spoke.

“Is that an Elder of the Demon Cult?” Linghu Chong asked in bewilderment.

“Didn’t you know? The ten skeletons are the remains of the Demon Cult Ten Elders,” Feng Qingyang said while pointing at a skeleton on the ground.

“Why did all the Demon Cult Ten Elders fall dead here?” Linghu Chong became quite curious.

“Tian Boguang will wake up in two more hours. If you keep asking about these past events of many years ago, do you think you’ll still have time left to learn some Kung Fu?” Feng Qingyang reproved.

“Right! Right! Grand Uncle-Master, please go on.” Linghu Chong replied.

“Those Demon Cult Elders had truly outstanding and brilliant minds. They were actually able to defeat the advanced moves of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance cleanly and completely.” Feng Qingyang sighed. “They didn’t know, however, that the most devastating move in the world is not inside Kung Fu, but in setting up schemes, intrigues, and traps. If one falls into someone’s clever trap, regardless of how brilliant his Kung Fu moves are, it would still be completely useless….” At these words, he raised his head and fell into a daze. Apparently he had remembered many things from the past.

Hearing the bitterness in his tone and seeing the anguish look on his face, Linghu Chong dared not interrupt and only thought to himself, “Could it be true that the Five Mountains Sword Alliance really had ‘no way to win in a fair fight,’ so they tricked the enemy into a trap? Grand Uncle-Master Feng is a member of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, but he probably didn’t object to such contemptible means. I guess in order to counter the enemies from the Demon Cult, it is probably necessary to use some contemptible means.”

Feng Qingyang went on talking. “If we judge them by their understanding of advanced Kung Fu theories, these Demon Cult Elders shouldn’t be counted as ones who have entered the realm of top level Kung Fu. They didn’t know that moves are static, but the one executing the moves is alive. No matter how clever the counter-move is for breaking static moves, as soon as they encounter moves

performed in a lively way, they would feel like their arms and legs are all tied up and would have no other choice but to give themselves up to the opponent's mercy. You must remember the keyword 'lively' here. When you learn a move, you need to learn it in a lively way; when you execute a move, you also need to execute it lively. If you only rigidly adhere to formalities without adding your own lively elements, even if you have mastered thousands or tens of thousands unique moves, as soon as you encounter a true elite master hand, he would still be able to overcome every single one of them."

Linghu Chong felt tremendous joy in his heart. He was the unrestrained and unconventional type. Each of Feng Qingyang's word struck a chord in his heart. He kept agreeing and agreeing, "Yes, yes! One must learn it lively and use it lively."

"Each of the Five Mountains sword schools have countless number of idiots who believed that as long as they become proficient with the sword moves taught by their masters then naturally they would become elite fighters." He paused the let out a disgruntled snort. "You must have heard of the saying, 'Once memorizing three hundred poems well, one will be capable to write poems himself!' After memorizing others' poems well, one might be able to write a couple of ragged verses, but without being original in conception, can he ever become a real poet?" Feng Qingyang criticized.

His criticism naturally included Yue Buqun as one of the "idiots" he had mentioned, but since firstly, Linghu Chong felt the comments were quite convincing, and secondly, Feng Qingyang didn't mention Yue Buqun's name specifically, he didn't argue.

"Learn it lively and use it lively is only the first step. Only when you can fight with no moves, you will eventually reach the realm of a true elite fighter. When you said 'all the moves become an integral whole, then the enemy would have no way of breaking them' earlier, you've only gotten less than half right. It's not 'an integral whole' but simply no moves. No matter how hard you work on making the moves an integral whole, as long as there's a trace of the connection, your enemy would have a flaw to exploit. If you don't have any moves at all,

then how is your enemy going to break your move?”

Linghu Chong’s heart thumped wildly and even his palms became burning hot as he mumbled, “No move at all, how do you break it? No move at all, how do you break it?” Suddenly, a whole new world he had never seen before or even dreamed about appeared in front of his eyes.

Feng Qingyang continued. “If you want to slice a piece of meat, you need to have the piece of meat before you can slice it; if you want to cut some firewood, you need to have the firewood before you can cut it; if your enemy wants to break your sword move, he needs to have your sword move before he can break it. When an ordinary person who has never learned any Kung Fu waves a sword wildly, no matter how knowledgeable you are, you still wouldn’t be able to predict where his next thrust or chop will land. Even someone with the most advanced sword skills still wouldn’t be able to defeat his move. Because there is no move, it’s impossible to break the move. If this person has never learned any Kung Fu, then even though he doesn’t have a sword move, others can still knock him down easily. True first-class sword art, on the other hand, will enable you to control others, not controlled by others.”

He picked up a shinbone from the ground and randomly pointed one end of it at Linghu Chong. “How are you going to break this move of mine?”

Linghu Chong had no idea what move that was. After a pause, he said, “This is not a move, so there’s no way I can break it.”

“That’s correct.” Feng Qingyang smiled. “When a Kung Fu practitioner uses a weapon or throw punches and kicks, he would always have moves. All you need to know is how to overcome it, and once you do know how, you can easily defeat his move and subdue him.”

“But what if the enemy didn’t have any move either?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Then he must be a first-class elite fighter also. The result of the fight could go either way. Maybe you are better, or maybe he’s better,” Feng Qingyang answered. He let out a sigh and said, “In today’s world, it’s very difficult to find such an elite fighter. If by chance you meet one or two, then you have really

good fortune. During my entire life, I've only met three of them."

"Who are these three?" Linghu Chong couldn't help but ask.

Feng Qingyang stared at him for a short while and then split into a smile. "Among Yue Buqun's apprentices, there's actually one who likes to poke his nose everywhere and not willing to devote himself to sword training. Great! Wonderful!"

"Sorry, I am wrong." Linghu Chong blushed and quickly bowed for forgiveness.

"No, you are not wrong." Feng Qingyang smiled. "You are a lively lad, just the type to my liking. We don't have much time left. You go ahead and work on merging all the thirty to forty Huashan style sword art moves together. Think how you can get them going smoothly with no interruption, and then try to forget all of them. You need to forget all of them completely without leaving a single one in your head. Then, a bit later, you can use the Huashan Style Sword Art With No Moves to fight Tian Boguang."

"Yes!" Linghu Chong answered, feeling half surprised and half pleased.

Linghu Chong studied the drawings on the rock with rapt attention. During the past several months, he had memorized the Huashan style sword moves on the rock wall well, so he didn't have to spend any time learning the moves. All he had to do was to try to connect all the distinct and separate sword moves together.

"Everything must be following the natural rhythm. Act when you have to act and stop when you have to stop. If you simply can't connect some of them, then don't connect them. In short, don't force anything," Feng Qingyang pointed out.

Linghu Chong nodded. Since all he had to do was to follow the natural flow, it became an easy task for him regardless of connecting them cleverly or clumsily. Soon, he had connected all the thirty to forty moves of Huashan style sword art together. But to merge all of them into one with no traceable rigid gaps was not so easy. He waved his sword, sometimes slashing to the left, sometimes chopping to the right, without thinking about any moves drawn on the rock

wall. He didn't care if his posture or position was close to the drawing or not and simply followed his own will. Occasionally when he had a smooth one, he couldn't help but feeling quite pleased with himself.

He had been in sword training for over ten years. Every time when he practiced, he would always stay very focused with all his heart, not daring to slack in any way. Yue Buqun was a very strict teacher. When his apprentices practiced forms or sword arts, if anyone's arm or leg were slightly off from the perfect position, he would immediately correct them. Everyone's every move or posture had to be in the absolutely perfect position without a single error to get his approval. Linghu Chong was the first and most senior apprentice, besides, he was always eager to do well in everything and excel others. In order to gain praises from Master and Master-Wife, he always put in extra efforts to be strict with himself. Feng Qingyang, on the other hand, had taught in a totally opposite way – the more casual the better. That fitted in with his personality just perfectly. He felt the kind of carefree and joy beyond words, and it seemed as if the pleasure was even more enjoyable than drinking ages old good wine. While he was still intoxicated in practicing, Tian Boguang had shouted from outside.

"Brother Linghu, will you please come out so we can have another contest."

That brought Linghu Chong back to reality. He stopped and stood still.

"Grand Uncle-Master, do you think this random slashing and chopping style sword form of mine will enable me to block his fast knife chops?" Linghu Chong asked hopefully.

"If you want to block, of course it won't help you much. But why do you have to block?" Feng Qingyang said.

Linghu Chong immediately got the idea and the feeling of joy washed over him.

"That's right. He is begging me to go down Mount Huashan with him, so of course he dared not to kill me. In that case, despite what knife moves he uses, I can simply ignore them and just focus on my own attacks."

Linghu Chong stepped out of the cave with his sword in his hand and saw

Tian Boguang waiting with his knife drawn.

"Brother Linghu, after Grandmaster Feng gave you some knacks and pointers, your sword skills surely improved a lot. However, when you sealed my point just now, it was only because of my oversight. I am not convinced yet. Let's have another fight," Tian Boguang suggested.

"Fine!" Linghu Chong answered as he thrust his sword out in a crooked manner. The blade wobbled as it moved forward; there was no strength attached in the thrust at all.

"What kind of move is that?" Tian Boguang was bewildered.

Seeing Linghu Chong's sword getting closer, Tian Boguang was just about to fend it off using his knife when Linghu Chong suddenly pulled his right hand back and jabbed the sword toward an empty space. Then following the jab, Linghu Chong retracted the sword quickly. The sword handle almost struck his own chest when he flicked his wrist, which sent the sword handle to another empty space to his right. Tian Boguang was even more bewildered. He threw a gentle probing chop cautiously. Linghu Chong didn't even care to dodge and simply drove his sword tip toward his opponent's lower stomach in an angle.

"How weird!" Tian Boguang shouted as he turned his knife around to block it.

After the two exchanged several moves, Linghu Chong started using the Huashan style sword moves on the rock wall, attacking without any defending, almost as if he was just practicing sword form all by himself. The continuous attacks sent Tian Boguang into a frantic rush.

"If you decide to ignore this chop of mine again, don't blame me when I chop your arm off!" Tian Boguang shouted.

"It's not going to be that easy!" Linghu Chong grinned as he initiated another three thrusts, all attacked from very odd and unusual positions. Relying on his fast eyes and quick hands, Tian Boguang successfully fended all of them off. Just when he was about to start his counter-attack, Linghu Chong suddenly threw his long sword straight up in the air. Tian Boguang looked up at the sword in the air when suddenly a heavy punch landed squarely on his nose. Blood

immediately gushed out from his nose. While Tian Boguang was still in shock, Linghu Chong used his hand as a sword and stabbed it out, and it struck Tian Boguang on his Tan-Zhong Acupoint once again. Tian Boguang slowly collapsed down, his face covered with a mixture of confusion and anger.

Linghu Chong turned around and Feng Qingyang called him back into the cave.

"You just got yourself another three hours for sword training. He is hurt even worse this time. He won't be able to wake up as easily as the last time. Only that when you fight him the next time, maybe he'll go all out and might not yield to you any more. You must be very careful. Go ahead and try out those Hengshan style sword art moves." Feng Qingyang suggested.

After getting more pointers and advice from Feng Qingyang, Linghu Chong used each move as if there was no move – with the essence of the move but without the form of it. Those unique Hengshan style sword moves by themselves were already extremely unpredictable and volatile, now it was even more difficult to find any trace of gap among them.

After Tian Boguang woke up, the two of them fought another seventy to eighty moves before Tian Boguang got knocked down once again.

It was already quite late in the day. Linghu Chong placed Tian Boguang, who was unable to move at all because of the sealed acupoints, behind some big rocks when Lu Dayou brought food up the cliff, while Feng Qingyang stayed inside the back cave.

"Sixth apprentice brother, I am having some real good appetites these days. Will you please bring some extra food tomorrow?" Linghu Chong asked.

Lu Dayou could tell that his big apprentice brother's face glowed with health and radiating vigor, quite different from the depressed and upset one in the last couple months. He couldn't help with his joy. He also noticed that Linghu Chong's robe was soaked with sweat and thought that Linghu Chong must have been practicing assiduously with his sword techniques.

"Great! I'll bring up a large basket full of food tomorrow," he said.

After Lu Dayou left, Linghu Chong opened Tian Boguang's sealed acupoints and invited him and Feng Qingyang to have dinner together. Feng Qingyang had enough after only a half bowl full of rice. Tian Boguang on the other hand, felt very aggrieved and had no appetite at all, raking the food in his mouth and pouring out streams of abuses at the same time. Suddenly, with a loud crack, the china bowl in his hand smashed into pieces from the tremendous forces coming from his grip. Broken china pieces and rice fell all over his clothes and the floor.

"Brother Tian, why are you being so hard on a rice bowl?" Linghu Chong burst into loud laughter.

"Damn it, I am being hard on you," Tian Boguang yelled in rage. "When we fought, you took advantage of me and spared no effort in defending yourself whatsoever, only because I didn't want to kill you. Tell me, you think this is fair? If I hadn't given ground to you, I'd have chopped your head off within thirty moves. Humph! Humph! Damn the little…little…."

Obviously he had wanted to scold Yilin, the little nun, but for some reason he stopped short, instead, he stood up and drew his knife.

"Linghu Chong, come and fight me again if you've got guts," he yelled out.

"Fine!" Linghu Chong replied and stepped forth, sword in hand.

Using the same strategy again, Linghu Chong paid no attention to Tian Boguang's fast knife chops and simply stabbed his sword at Tian Boguang with clever moves. But this time Tian Boguang was quite relentless. After they exchanged about twenty moves or so, he threw two chops – one landed on Linghu Chong's thigh and the other one left a cut on Linghu Chong's left arm. He had shown some mercy after all – neither of the two wounds was critical. In astonishment accompanied by great pain, Linghu Chong found himself in a very awkward situation. His sword techniques became very sluggish and only a few move later, Tian Boguang kicked him down to the ground.

"Do you want more fights?" Placing the sharp blade right next to Linghu Chong's throat, Tian Boguang yelled. "Humph, I'll make sure to leave a couple of cuts on you every time, so even though you won't die, your blood will drain

and your arms and legs will look really good."

"Of course I want more fights! Even if I can't beat you, do you think my Grand Uncle-Master Feng would just look on with folded arms and let you ride roughshod?" Linghu Chong rebuffed with a smile.

"He is a senior grandmaster. He won't pick a fight with me," Tian Boguang said as he moved his knife away.

Fearing that Feng Qingyang might start a fight out of anger because he had wounded Linghu Chong, Tian Boguang was actually quite apprehensive. Even though Feng Qingyang looked very old, he sure wasn't rotten. From Feng's piercing eyes, Tian Boguang could tell that Feng must have excellent inner energy, not mentioning his god-like sword skills. He figured that Feng didn't even have to kill – all Feng needed to do was to drive him down Mount Huashan, and that would be just as bad.

Linghu Chong tore a piece of his robe off and used it to wrap up the two wounds before entering the cave.

"Grant Uncle-Master, that chap has changed his strategy and decided to cut me for real now! If my right arm gets wounded and can't use a sword anymore, it would be impossible to beat him." Linghu Chong shook his head in a wry smile.

"Luckily it's late already. You can tell him that you'll fight him again tomorrow morning. Let's not sleep tonight. I'll use the entire night to teach you three sword moves," Feng Qingyang instructed.

"Three moves?" Linghu Chong repeated, not understanding why a mere three sword moves would take up an entire night to learn.

"You look like a smart one. I wonder if you are really that smart or only look like one. If you are truly smart, then you might be able to learn the three sword moves within the night. If you aren't smart and only have ordinary comprehension, then…then…there would be no need to fight him again tomorrow morning, and you can simply admit your failure and follow him off Mount Huashan!" Feng Qingyang said.

Hearing those words from his Grand Uncle-Master, Linghu Chong knew that the three sword moves must be very extraordinary and sophisticated. That actually aroused his willingness to take on the challenge.

"Grand Uncle-Master," he said fearlessly, "if I can't learn these three sword moves within one night, then I'd rather die from his blade than surrender and leave Mount Huashan with him."

"Good." Feng Qingyang smiled. He raised his head and thought for quite a while before finally saying, "To learn three moves within one night is really asking for the impossible. You won't need the second move just yet. We can work on only the first one and the third one. But…but…many of the variations in the third move come from the second move. Very well! Let's ignore all the related variations and see if it will work."

He was more like talking to himself. But after thinking about it for a moment, he shook his head.

Seeing the worried look on Feng Qingyang's face, Linghu Chong became very anxious. The harder it is to learn a type of martial arts, of course, the more powerful it will be. Then he heard Feng Qingyang murmuring again.

"If he forgets one of the three hundred and sixty variations in the first move, then he would get the third move wrong. That's not going to work."

Linghu Chong was astonished when he heard that only the first move already contained three hundred and sixty variations.

Feng Qingyang started counting with his fingers. "Gui-Mei tends toward Wu-Wang, Wu-Wang tends toward Tong-Ren, Tong-Ren tends toward Da-You. Jia turns into Bing, Bing turns into Geng, Geng turns into Kui. Zi connects Chou, Chen connects Si, Wu connects Wei. Wind to thunder is one change, mountain to lake is one change, water to fire is one change. Qian and Kun activate each other, Zhen and Dui activate each other, Li and Si activate each other. Three increases to five, five increases to nine…."

The more he counted the more worried he looked. Finally he said with a heavy sigh, "Chong, when I learned this move, it took me three months. To

expect you to learn two moves in one night is really like a joke. Think about it, 'Gui-Mei tends toward Wu-Wang….'"

At those words, he stopped talking and apparently was lost in deep thought. After a long while, he asked.

"Now, where was I?"

"Grand Uncle-Master, you said Gui-Mei tends toward Wu-Wang, Wu-Wang tends toward Tong-Ren, Tong-Ren tends toward Da-You," Linghu Chong answered.

"Ha, you've got good memory. What's next?" Feng Qingyang raised his eyebrows.

"Grand Uncle-Master said, 'Jia turns into Bing, Bing turns into Geng, Geng turns into Kui….'" Linghu Chong recited along and was actually able to repeat almost half of what Feng Qingyang said, but he could no longer remember the rest of it.

"Have you learned the General Index of the Dugu Nine Swords before?" Feng Qingyang was astonished.

"No. I have never learned anything like that before. I had no idea that this is called the Dugu Nine Swords." Linghu Chong replied.

"If you haven't learned it before, how come you are able to recite it?" Feng Qingyang asked.

"I just memorized it when you read it just now," Linghu Chong answered.

"Hey, this might work!" Feng Qingyang slapped his thigh in excitement. "Although you won't be able to learn the whole thing, you can simply memorize it. It would be alright if we only learn half of the third move. Now remember these: Gui-Mei tends toward Wu-Wang, Wu-Wang tends toward Tong-Ren, Tong-Ren tends toward Da-You…."

He went on and on and recited over three hundred words before finally saying, "Give it a try. Recite it."

Linghu Chong had been staying very focused trying to memorize the script. After getting the go, he started reciting and only missed ten words or so. Feng Qingyang corrected them. The second time when Linghu Chong recited them, he only missed seven words. By the time he finished reciting the script a third time, he didn't miss any word at all.

"Excellent! Excellent!" Feng Qingyang was very pleased. He then taught Linghu Chong another section of the script about three hundred words long. After Linghu Chong memorized those well, he taught the next section of about three hundred words to Linghu Chong.

The General Index of the Dugu Nine Swords had a total of over three thousand words, besides, the contents of the script weren't really connected to each other logically, so even though Linghu Chong had extraordinary memorizing abilities, he still couldn't help but remember parts of it while forgetting other parts of it. It took him over two hours and many reminders from Feng Qingyang to finally memorize the entire script with no errors. Feng Qingyang made him recite the script from the very beginning to the very end another three times and was finally convinced that he had memorized all of them.

"The General Index is the key and foundation of the Dugu Nine Swords. Even though you have memorized it at the moment, you only did it by ear for the sake of saving time while having no idea about the theories behind. You can forget about it as easily. From now on, you must recite it days and nights."

"Yes!" Linghu Chong answered.

"The first move of the Dugu Nine Swords, General Index Stance, has many variations to implement the General Index Script. Let's not rush into that one yet. The second move, Sword-breaking Stance, can be used to overcome sword arts from every single school or cult in the world. No need to rush into that one either. The third move, Knife-breaking Stance, can be used to overcome knife moves of Single Knife, Double Knives, Willow-Leaf Cutlass, Ghost-Beheaded Saber, Large Cleaver, Horse-Cutting Blade, and so on. Tian Boguang is using the Fast Knife Chops technique out of the Single Knife moves. Let's focus on

learning the part about how to overcome his knife techniques specifically tonight."

Realizing that the second move of the Dugu Nine Swords could overcome all the sword arts from all the schools and clans out there, and the third move of the Dugu Nine Swords could overcome all the knife moves, while feeling stunned, Linghu Chong couldn't help but show his joy.

"The nine stances must be very brilliant. I have never heard of it before." Because of the great excitement, his voice trembled.

"Your Master probably has never seen the moves of the Dugu Nine Swords, but he sure has heard about the name Dugu Nine Swords before. He just doesn't want to mention it to you, that's all," Feng Qingyang said.

"Why's that?" Linghu Chong asked with surprise.

Feng Qingyang didn't answer the question and went on explaining the moves. "The third move, Knife-breaking Stance, stresses on using light to resist heavy and using fast to overcome slow. The chap Tian Boguang's fast knife chops are surely very fast, so you will have to be even faster than him. For a young lad like you, it's probably ok to try to be faster than him; you might win or you might lose. There's no guaranteed success. For an old rotten folk like me, if I still wanted to be faster than him, then the only solution would be launching my attack before he even starts his. If you can foresee what kind of a move he will be using and then scramble before him, before the enemy even raised his hand, your sword is already pointing at his vital parts. That way no matter how fast your enemy is, you will still be faster."

"Yes, yes! So it teaches about how to anticipate the enemy beforehand." Linghu Chong nodded again and again.

"Good, good! You got it!" Feng Qingyang praised as he applauded. "'Anticipating the enemy beforehand' is precisely the key to this set of sword techniques. Before anyone executes a move, there will always be many signs that you can catch. If he plans to slash toward your left arm with his next chop, he will certainly cast a glance at your left arm, and if his knife is in the lower

right part at the time, then of course he will raise his knife in an arc before swishing his blade down in an angle."

Feng Qingyang went on and explained all the variations in the third sword stance that would overcome fast knife chops, one by one in great details. Linghu Chong felt so relaxed and happy as he listened in. He almost felt like that he was a country boy who had just entered the inner circle of the royal palace, and every single thing he saw or heard was new and interesting. The third sword stance had very complicated variations, and within the limited time, Linghu Chong was only able to comprehend about twenty percent of it. He simply worked hard on memorizing the rest.

The teacher taught enthusiastically and the student studied energetically; both of them lost track of time completely. Suddenly, Tian Boguang shouted outside of the cave.

"Brother Linghu, it's daybreak now! Are you awake yet?"

"Wow, it's daybreak already," Linghu Chong uttered.

"It's a pity that we had so little time." Feng Qingyang sighed. "You've learned very quickly, way beyond my expectation already. Go ahead and fight him," he said.

"Yes." Linghu Chong answered. He closed his eyes and went through the gist of all the things he had learned during the night in his head. Suddenly he opened his eyes and asked.

"Grand Uncle-Master, I still have one more question. Why are all the variations attacking techniques with no defending ones at all?"

"Dugu Nine Swords, once stepping in, never steps back! Every technique is an attacking technique. When you force your enemy to have no other choice but to defend himself, of course there's no need to defend yourself. Senior master Dugu Seeking-A-Loss, who created this set of sword techniques, had a name 'Seeking-A-Loss.' He had been seeking a loss all his life and still couldn't get one. Once the sword techniques were executed, he would become unmatched anywhere in the world. Why would he have to defend? If anyone could have

forced him to draw his sword back and defend himself, the respectful master would have burst with joy and be delighted beyond measure." Feng Qingyang said.

"Dugu Seeking-A-Loss, Dugu Seeking-A-Loss," Linghu Chong muttered as he imagined how the senior master had wandered about the Martial World, unmatched anywhere, with only his sword, and couldn't even find a single one who was capable of forcing him into a defending stance. That was truly admirable.

"Hurry up! Come out! Let me give you two more cuts!" Tian Boguang's voice rose again.

"I am coming!" Linghu Chong replied.

"I am very concerned about one thing right now." Feng Qingyang knitted his eyebrows together. "When you go out to fight him, if he injures your right arm or right wrist as soon as the fight breaks out, then you would be incapable to fight and leave yourself at his mercy. I am quite worried about that."

"I'll do my best, Grand Uncle-Master! You didn't waste all that time teaching me with all your heart. I won't let you down no matter what," Linghu Chong said fearlessly, in high spirits.

As soon as he stepped out of the cave, he immediately put on a dejected and apathetic face. After a yawn, a stretch, and then some rubbing into his eyes, he finally said to Tian Boguang.

"Hey, brother Tian, you got up too early. Didn't you have a good rest last night?"

In the mean time, he was actually thinking to himself, "All I need is to hold out through this current one. If I get to study several more hours, I would never be afraid of him again."

"Brother Linghu," Tian Boguang said as he raised his knife, "I really don't intend to hurt you, but you are simply too stubborn and won't go down Mount Huashan with me. If we continue fighting like this, I'll be forced to add ten or

twenty more cuts on you and have you beaten black and blue. Wouldn't that be too bad for you?"

Linghu Chong suddenly got an idea. "You don't even need to add ten or twenty more cuts on me. All you need to do is to cut my right arm off or injure my right hand, so I can't use a sword. Then wouldn't I be at your disposal as you wish? Either to kill me or take me prisoner?"

"I only want you to admit your loss. Why do I want to injure your right arm or right hand?" Tian Boguang shook his head.

Linghu Chong was overjoyed, yet he put on a very depressed face. "I am afraid that you are just saying it right now. Once you get mad because of your losses, you would spare no effort in using all kinds of cruel and vicious tactics," he complained.

"You don't have to goad me. First, I have no grudges against you; secondly, I respect you as a true man with integrity; thirdly, if I injure you too badly, I am afraid someone might come and give me trouble. Go ahead!" Tian Boguang said.

"Alright! Brother Tian, please go ahead." Linghu Chong replied.

Tian Boguang gave a fake slash and immediately followed it with a tilted chop. His blade flashed in the sunshine with blinding reflections and the chop looked very vicious. Linghu Chong was about to overcome it with one of the variations in the third sword stance out of the Dugu Nine Swords, but Tian Boguang's knife moves came too fast, by the time he was going to attack, the knife move had already changed. He was just one step too slow.

"How terrible! How terrible! I can't even be fast enough to use the newly learned sword techniques. Grand Uncle-Master must be calling me an idiot right now," Linghu Chong groaned inwardly in great worries.

After a few more moves, cold sweats started rolling down Linghu Chong's forehead. But in Tian Boguang's eyes, his sword techniques looked extremely fierce, and every move seemed as if it was the exact restraint to Tian's knife moves. Tian Boguang couldn't help but feel worried.

“He could have killed me with the last several sword techniques. Why did he slow it down just a little bit intentionally?” he thought to himself. “Oh, I got it. He is being lenient and wants to beat me into a retreat in the face of difficulties. But even though I see the difficulties, I can’t simply retreat. I have to hold out with all my might.”

Because of these thoughts, with every chop, he dared not to use all his strength and made sure he would always have extra energy left in case of an emergency. The two dreaded each other and both fought in a very cautious manner.

After a while, Tian Boguang gradually increased his knife chopping speed, and Linghu Chong also became more familiar with the variations of the Dugu Nine Swords third sword stance. While lights of the knife and the sword flashed, the two fought faster and faster.

Suddenly Tian Boguang let out a loud roar as he threw a kick with his right foot, which struck Linghu Chong in the stomach. Linghu Chong fell down facing up.

In the split of a second, Linghu Chong thought, “All I need is another day and night. This time tomorrow I am sure I can beat him.” He let go of his sword, shut his eyes tight, held his breath, and pretended to be knocked out cold.

Seeing that Linghu Chong laid on the ground unconscious, Tian Boguang was stunned. But knowing that Linghu Chong was cunning and crafty, he dared not to bend over to check, afraid that Linghu Chong might jump up and attack all of a sudden to seek a victory from a defeat. So he crossed his blade in front of him and then took a couple of steps closer.

“Brother Linghu? Are you alright?” he called out.

He called a few more times and found Linghu Chong finally regaining himself slowly with little breathing.

“Let’s…let’s fight again.” Linghu Chong said in a trembling voice.

He struggled to stand up, but half way up, his left leg gave out and he fell on

the ground again.

“You are not going to make it. Why don’t you have a good rest for a day and then follow me down Mount Huashan tomorrow?” Tian Boguang suggested.

Linghu Chong didn’t express any opinion of his and pushed the ground with one hand, trying to stand up while panting hard.

With no more doubts, Tian Boguang took a step forward and grabbed onto Linghu Chong’s right arm to prop him up, but when he took the step forward, his foot “happened” to step on top of Linghu Chong’s long sword on the ground, and while guarding himself with the knife in his right hand, his grip also happened to grab onto a acupoint on Linghu Chong’s right arm to make sure Linghu Chong couldn’t play any tricks. Linghu Chong’s entire body weight hung onto Tian Boguang’s left arm and he appeared to be completely weak and frail.

“Who asked for your help? Damn it!” Linghu Chong swore and then limped back into the cave.

“Hey, you just gained an entire day and night without any extra effort. Don’t you think it was a bit despicable and shameless?” Feng Qingyang said with a smile.

“Well, when you are dealing with despicable and shameless people, I suppose a small despicable and shameless trick would be acceptable.” Linghu Chong laughed.

“What if you are dealing with a gentleman?” Feng Qingyang asked with a serious face.

“A gentleman?” Linghu Chong was taken by surprise and became speechless.

“What are you going to do if you are dealing with a gentleman?” Feng Qingyang fixed his piercing eyes on Linghu Chong’s face and asked coldly.

“Well, even though he is a gentleman, if he wants to kill me, I can’t just let him. When I have to, I guess I will have to use a little bit of the despicable and shameless tricks,” Linghu Chong answered.

Feng Qingyang was delighted beyond measurement. “Great! Great! If you can say that, then you are not a hypocrite who only pretends to do good,” he said loudly. “A true man does things to his own like, just like floating clouds and flowing water – natural and smooth, come and go freely. Rules of the Martial World or regulations of schools and clans are all complete bull!”

Linghu Chong let out a slight smile. Every word of Feng Qingyang had struck a chord in his heart and made him feel indescribable joy. But since Master had been repeatedly admonishing him that even if one had to give up his own life, he should never defame the great reputation of the Huashan Sword School by breaking school rules or violating regulations of the Martial World, he really couldn’t echo Grand Uncle-Master’s point publicly; besides, the words “hypocrite who only pretends to do good” seemed to be satirizing his Master’s nickname of “Gentleman Sword,” so he only let out a slight smile and didn’t chime in.

Feng Qingyang reached out with his wizened fingers and stroked Linghu Chong’s hair gently, a bright smile blossoming on his face.

“Among Yue Buqun’s apprentices, there are actually good talents like you. That chap does have some taste. He wasn’t a complete loser.” The “chap” he had mentioned of course meant Yue Buqun.

“Kid, you really suit my taste. Come on, let’s practice some more of Great Hero Dugu’s first sword stance and the third sword stance.” Feng Qingyang patted on Linghu Chong’s shoulder.

Feng Qingyang went ahead and picked some key issues in the first sword stance of the Dugu Nine Swords to explain to Linghu Chong. After Linghu Chong comprehended them, he then explained in detail the related variations in the third sword stance with both words and gestures. There were some long swords in the back cave, so both of them used Huashan style long swords to demonstrate and perform. Linghu Chong memorized everything with all his heart, and every time when he had a question, he would ask it right away. Because they had plenty of time during the day, the learning process wasn’t as intense as the night before, and each stance and variation could be explained and

demonstrated in great details.

After dinner, Linghu Chong slept for four hours and then continued with the learning. The next morning, Tian Boguang was convinced that Linghu Chong had been injured pretty badly the previous day, so he didn't even press with his shouts outside this time. Linghu Chong was just happy that he could continue learning sword techniques at the back cave. By the time of about two o'clock in the afternoon, Linghu Chong had learned all the variations in the third sword stance of the Dugu Nine Swords completely.

"It's no big deal if you still can't beat him today. If you get to study for another day and night, I am sure you will win tomorrow no matter what," Feng Qingyang declared.

Linghu Chong nodded and then walked out of the cave slowly with the long sword left by a senior grandmaster of the Huashan Sword School in hand. When he saw Tian Boguang looking into the distance from the edge of the cliff, he put on a pretended surprised face.

"Why, brother Tian? How come you are still here?"

"I am waiting for you. Sorry about the offense yesterday. Are you feeling better today?"

"I didn't see anything getting better. The wound on my leg from your knife chop is still hurting really badly."

"Ha-ha, that day when we fought in Hengyang Town, your wounds were a lot more severe than today, yet you never said anything to give the impression of weakness. I know you have a whole bag of tricks. When you strike a pose to show your weakness, you probably are thinking about a surprise attack. I am not going to fall for it," Tian Boguang said with a smile.

"You have already fallen for it. Even if you can figure it out right now, it would still be too late!" Linghu Chong's face split into a big smile. "Brother Tian, look out!"

At the exact moment of his last word, Linghu Chong thrust his sword at Tian

Boguang's chest. Tian Boguang raised his knife hurriedly to parry it, but his knife hit nothing. Meanwhile, Linghu Chong's second thrust had arrived.

"Excellent speed!" Tian Boguang praised as he crossed his knife to block the attack, but Linghu Chong had already launched his third and forth thrusts.

"I've got some even faster ones," Linghu Chong declared.

He immediately thrust out the fifth and the sixth attacks. Once he started his attacks, each thrust was followed by another continuous thrust, and each thrust was faster than the previous one. He had really grasped the essence of the Dugu Nine Swords – once stepping in, never step back, and every thrust is an attack.

After ten moves or so, Tian Boguang became terror-stricken. He had no clue how to fend off the endless of attacks. Every time when Linghu Chong lunge a thrust, he would take a step back. After another ten thrusts, he had retreated to the very brink of the cliff. Linghu Chong didn't slow down his attack one bit and with four whistling sounds, he lunged another four thrusts, all of which pointing at Tian Boguang's vital parts. Tian Boguang worked his best and parried two of the thrusts away, but could not fend off the third thrust in any way. He stepped back with his left foot but his foot only landed on emptiness. He knew clearly that it was a bottomless abyss behind him and anyone falling down it would be smashed into pieces. At the critical moment, he chopped down at the ground with all his strength and was able to stable himself right on the edge. By then, the fourth thrust from Linghu Chong had arrived and the tip of the sword stopped inches short from his throat.

Tian Boguang's face was as white as a sheet of paper. Linghu Chong didn't let out a sound either and simply remained still with the sword tip right next to Tian's throat.

"Go ahead and kill me. What are you waiting for?" Tian Boguang yelled angrily after a long silence.

Linghu Chong pulled his right hand back and leapt several big steps backward.

"Brother Tian, you just had an oversight and permitted me to take the

initiative. This one doesn't count. Let's fight again," he said.

Tian Boguang let out a loud snort and then waved his knife madly in a thunderstorm-like attack toward Linghu Chong.

"I'll attack first this time. I am not going to let you take advantage again," he shouted.

Seeing the fierce chop of the steel blade coming toward him, Linghu Chong jabbed his sword in an angle toward Tian Boguang's lower stomach while turning his upper body to dodge away from the sharp knife blade.

Realizing that Linghu Chong's thrust was quickly approaching him, Tian Boguang hurriedly turned his knife around and smacked it toward Linghu Chong's sword. Relying on his own exceptional strength, he thought that as soon as the knife and the sword collided, for sure he would be able to knock the long sword out of Linghu Chong's grip.

With the first thrust Linghu Chong was already able to take on the initiative. The second and the third thrust shot out continuously. Each thrust was accurate and effective, and his sword tip was never a second apart from his opponent's vital parts.

Tian Boguang didn't have enough time to parry off the attacks and had to take one step back after another. Who would have expected that after ten moves or so, he actually followed the same old disastrous road and once again retreated to the very edge of the cliff?

Linghu Chong slashed down with his sword and forced Tian Boguang to wave his knife down to guard his lower portion body. At the meantime he reached out with his left hand and struck out in a claw hand. The claw hand struck with perfect timing and broke through from a flaw in Tian Boguang's defense line. Linghu Chong held the claw hand still, when his fingers were only two inches from Tian Boguang's Tan-Zhong Acupoint on his chest. He had sealed Tian Boguang's Tan-Zhong Acupoint twice before. Tian Boguang knew very well, that if Linghu Chong had struck out with his claw hand, he would have collapsed and his body would have fallen into the bottomless abyss this time

instead of falling onto the ground. When Linghu Chong held his hand still, he was obviously giving ground.

The two both stayed still for a brief moment before Linghu Chong once again leapt back to yield.

Tian Boguang sat on a rock and meditated a short while with his eyes shut. Suddenly he shouted a loud roar as he launched his attack, chopping down vertically with mighty force. This time he took the surroundings into consideration and made sure his back was facing the mountain. He figured that even if he were forced into retreat, he would end up retreating into the cave. And without worrying about falling down the cliff, he could really fight it out.

By now Linghu Chong had a good grasp of the various variations in Tian Boguang's knife moves. When Tian's chop came, he dodged to the right, and at the meantime, slashed his long sword toward Tian Boguang's left shoulder. Tian Boguang circled his knife back to block, but Linghu Chong had already retracted his sword and thrust it at his left waist. Tian Boguang's left arm was only less than a foot away from his left waist. When he had circled his knife back, he was actually defending and launching a counter-attack at the same time, and to be able to execute his counter-attack, he had attached much strength with the move, which sent the knife chopping out. In a hurry, he didn't have enough time to pull his knife back to guard his waist, so with no other choice, he took a half step to his right. Linghu Chong threw another thrust at Tian's right cheek. Tian Boguang hurriedly raised his knife to block when Linghu Chong's sword suddenly pointed at his left leg. Not able to block this one in time, either, Tian Boguang had to take another step to his right.

Linghu Chong continued with endless thrusts, all of which aimed at Tian Boguang's left side and forced him to retreat to his right one step after another. After about ten steps, Tian Boguang found himself near the end of the cliff where a big rock blocked his retreating route. Leaning his back against the rock wall, Tian Boguang simply waved his knife all around himself and paid no attention to how Linghu Chong might thrust his sword out. Tearing sounds came into his ears continuously as Linghu Chong's sword slashed six times on his left

sleeve, left side of the robe, and the left leg of his pants. The entire six slashes only left cuts on his clothing without really touching his skin. Tian Boguang knew too well that any one of the six slashes could have cut his belly open or cut off his arm and leg. In the instant, Tian Boguang felt so disheartened and dispirited that it seemed as if all his hopes had died out. In unspeakable despair, he spewed out a mouthful of blood.

Within the short moment, Linghu Chong had succeeded in forcing Tian Boguang to the very edge between life and death three times in a roll. Linghu Chong almost couldn't believe it, himself. Just a few days ago, his opponent still had much superior Kung Fu than him, yet right now he had taken the lead and had his opponent completely in his power. He had won so easily that he didn't even have to use all his strength. Although he maintained his composure, deep in his heart, he was really enlightened beyond words. By the time Tian Boguang spurted out a mouthful of blood after the crushing defeat, remorse welled up in Linghu Chong's heart.

"Brother Tian," he said, "victories and defeats are normal and common. Why are you taking it so hard? Didn't I lose to you many times before?"

Tian Boguang threw his knife down and shook his head. "Senior grandmaster Feng has miraculous sword skills. No one will be a match for him in the entire world. I will never be a match for you again."

"Brother Tian, you said it right. It was all because of Grand Uncle-Master Feng's great advice, I was able to gain victory." Linghu Chong picked up the knife and handed it back respectfully with both hands. "Grand Uncle-Master Feng hopes that you can grant him a request."

"My life is at your mercy, what's there to talk about?" Tian Boguang didn't take the knife and mocked in a sad tone.

"Grand Uncle-Master has withdrawn from society and lived a hermit's life for many years. He prefers not to be disturbed by vulgar people. When you, brother Tian, leaves Mount Huashan, would you please not mention the respectful Grand Uncle-Master's name to anyone? I would really appreciate that," Linghu

Chong said.

“Why don’t you just stab me with your sword to rid the witness? Wouldn’t that be a lot easier?” Tian Boguang mocked coldly.

Linghu Chong took two steps back and slid his sword back to the sheath.

“Brother Tian, earlier when your Kung Fu skills were way ahead of mine, you could have whacked me with a single chop, and then this would never have happened. I am only asking a favor from you to not tell anyone else the whereabouts of my Grand Uncle-Master Feng. I dare not to mean any intimidation or offense,” he explained sincerely.

“Fine. I won’t.” Tian Boguang agreed.

“Many thanks to you, brother Tian!” Linghu Chong bowed deeply down.

“I have come to invite you down Mount Huashan as instructed. I guess that’s not going to work now, but we are not done yet. I probably will never be able to beat you in a fight again in this life. I am not giving up though. This concerns my own life, so I would have no choice but to keep pestering you. You can’t blame me for not being a true man. Brother Linghu, farewell for now.” At the last word, Tian Boguang cupped his hands with a salute and then walked off.

Linghu Chong remembered the deadly poison that was planted in Tian Boguang’s body. After Tian left Mount Huashan, the poison would soon become active and kill him. After so many fierce fights with him, Linghu Chong felt as if they were much closer unwittingly. He almost called out with an impulse, “I’ll go with you.” Then he remembered that he was still being punished on the “Cliff of Contemplation”, and without Master’s permission, he was not allowed to even take a step off the cliff. Besides, Tian was a rapist who did all kinds of evil. If he had left together with Tian, wouldn’t he be wallowing in the mire with Tian? That would surely bring disgrace and ruin upon him and lead to endless trouble. With those thoughts, he held the words back and simply looked on as Tian Boguang descended down the path.

Linghu Chong went back into the cave and bowed down to the ground.

“Grand Uncle-Master, you not only saved my life, but also taught me superb sword techniques. How can I ever repay you for the kindness and grace?”

“Superb sword techniques, superb sword techniques! Hmm, it’s still far from that.” Feng Qingyang let out a smile, yet the smile was really in a mood of loneliness and depression.

“May I make bold to ask Grand Uncle-Master to teach me all of the Dugu Nine Swords techniques?” Linghu Chong pleaded.

“Are you sure you won’t regret it later for learning the Dugu Nine Swords?” Feng Qingyang asked.

Linghu Chong was confused for a moment, thinking that why would he regret it later, then he quickly found an answer and thought, “I see. The Dugu Nine Swords are not sword techniques from our own school. Grand Uncle-Master meant that Master might not approve it and punish me once he finds out about it. But Master never restricts me from learning other school’s techniques for references. He has said before that stones from other hills may serve to polish the jade on this one – advice from others may help one overcome one’s shortcomings. Besides, I have already learned many Heng-Shan, Hengshan, Taishan, and Songshan Sword Schools’ sword moves from the drawings on the rock wall. I even learned some Demon Cult Ten Elders’ Kung Fu. The Dugu Nine Swords Kung Fu is so magnificent. It is the kind of unraveled skill that us martial arts practitioner would crave about even in our dreams. I am really very lucky to have a senior grandmaster in our school who is willing to teach it to me.”

“This is the most fortunate thing in my entire life. I would only feel grateful, never regrets,” he said as he knelt down.

“Very well, I will teach you then. If I don’t teach the Dugu Nine Swords to you, there probably wouldn’t be Dugu Nine Swords left in this world a few years from now,” Feng Qingyang said with a smile.

For a moment, his face showed traces of great delight, but soon they were replaced with a dreary expression. After a long pause, he finally continued.

“Tian Boguang definitely won’t just give up so easy. Even if he decides to come back again, it’s going to be at least ten to fifteen days from now. Your Kung Fu is already better than his, and you certainly have more tricks than he does. I don’t think you’ll ever be afraid of him again. We have plenty of time now, so you must study from the very beginning to ensure a solid foundation.”

This time Feng Qingyang went through the script of the General Index Stance, the first stance of the Dugu Nine Swords, one sentence at a time, and explained in great details bundled with various variations that were implementations of the script. Linghu Chong had simply memorized the script by ear without understanding most of the ideas and theories behind it. Now with Feng Qingyang’s calm and unhurried explanation, he was able to comprehend many principles of advanced-level Kung Fu and several brilliant and profound variations every moment of it. He couldn’t help but show his great happiness and great admiration throughout the time.

The old and the young went over the brilliant sword techniques in the Dugu Nine Swords atop the “Cliff of Contemplation.” They started from General Index Stance and went on with Sword-breaking Stance, Knife-breaking Stance, Spear-breaking Stance, Mace-breaking Stance, Whip-breaking Stance, Palm-breaking Stance, and Missile-breaking Stance all the way till the ninth stance, Energy-breaking Stance.

The Spear-breaking Stance included techniques to overcome long weapons such as long-handled spear, long-handled halberd, snake-shaped spear, staff, fanged cudgel, white wax stick, Buddhist monk’s staff, and Buddhist monk’s spade.

The Mace-breaking Stance was used to overcome short weapons such as steel club, iron mace, acupoint-sealing peg, crutches, Emei[61] sting, dagger, war axe, iron plate, octagonal hammer, and iron awl.

The Whip-breaking stance was able to overcome flexible weapons such as long cord, whip, three-sectioned staff, chain spear, iron chain, fishing net, and meteor hammer.

Although each move was just one stance, it had endless variations. The more Linghu Chong learned, the more powerful it became when he comprehended the connections between each stance. The last three stances were the most difficult ones.

The Palm-breaking Stance overcame Kung Fu skills related to one's fists, legs, fingers, and palms. If the opponent were brave enough to fight against a sword with bare hands, he had to have superb Kung Fu skills and that using a weapon or not was really no difference for him any more. There are many fist forms, leg forms, finger forms, and palm forms in the world, and all of them are very complex. The Palm-breaking Stance included techniques to overcome boxing and grappling, joint manipulation and acupoint sealing, demon claw and tiger claw hands, iron sand divine palm, and the type of barehanded Kung Fu skills.

The word "Missile" in the name of the Missile-breaking Stance included the many different kinds of missiles and projectiles. To be able to learn this stance, the practitioner must first learn the skill of distinguishing the type of the missile by ear. He not only should be capable of blocking the many kinds of missiles coming from the enemy with his long sword, but also redirecting the force in the missiles to send them back and injure the enemy with his own missiles.

When it came to the ninth stance, Energy-breaking Stance, Feng Qingyang only taught Linghu Chong the script and formula of how to practice it.

Feng Qingyang explained, "This stance is used to overcome opponents who have great inner energy. The essence of the move really depends on your own interpretation. When senior master Dugu took on the entire Martial World with this set of Dugu Nine Swords many years ago, he couldn't even find a single person that could defeat him, that was all because he had reached the acme of perfection with the set of sword techniques. The same sword technique from the same Huashan style sword art could have very different effect and power. It's the same with the Dugu Nine Swords. Even though you have learned the sword techniques, if you can't perfect your skills, you would still be no match for first-class elite fighters in today's world. You have already entered the field. If you prefer to win than lose, go practice hard for another twenty years, then you will

be capable of competing with the key players in the world."

The more Linghu Chong studied, the more he realized that there were endless variations in the nine stances, and it will take a very long time for him to actually probe all the profound knowledge in them. When he heard his Grand Uncle-Master saying that he still needed to work hard on practicing the sword techniques for at least twenty more years, he wasn't surprised at all.

"If I'm able to fully understand the idea left by senior master Dugu when he created the nine stances of Dugu Nine Swords, I would be overjoyed," he said.

"You don't have to unduly humble yourself. Great Master Dugu was one with extraordinary intelligence. To be able to master his sword techniques, the key lies on the word 'comprehension,' not simply memorizing mechanically. Once you understand the essence of the sword techniques, you can use it anyway you want. Even if you have forgotten all the variations completely, it wouldn't matter anyway. And when you are in a real fight, the more you forget about them, the less you will be restricted by the original sword stances. You are good Kung Fu material, just the right kind to learn this set of sword techniques. Humph, in today's world, I doubt that there's really any extraordinary hero out there. You should remain diligent in your studies. I am leaving now," Feng Qingyang said.

Linghu Chong was dumbfounded. "Grand Uncle-Master, where…where are you going?" his voice quivering, he asked anxiously.

"I have been living by the back side of Mount Huashan for decades. I just had a sudden impulse earlier and came out of my cave to teach you the set of sword techniques, hoping that senior master Dugu's unrivalled and superb Kung Fu wouldn't get rotten together with me. Of course it's time to go back now," Feng Qingyang said.

"Grand Uncle-Master, so you live right by the back side of the mountain. That's wonderful! I can serve upon you days and nights to help rid your lonesomeness," Linghu Chong said happily.

"Starting from now on, I will never see anyone from the Huashan Sword School. Even you are not an exception," Feng Qingyang said sternly.

Seeing the frightened and confused look on Linghu Chong's face, he changed into a softer tone.

"Chong, fate brought us together, and you are very to my liking. I am truly very delighted to have you, such a wonderful boy, to carry on my sword techniques in my old age. If you still think I am your Grand Uncle-Master, then don't come looking for me to make things difficult."

"Grand Uncle-Master, why?" Linghu Chong felt great sorrow in his heart.

"Don't even tell your Master that you have seen me." Feng Qingyang shook his head.

"I will follow your instructions," Linghu Chong said as tear started to emerge in his eyes.

"Good kid, good kid!" Feng Qingyang stroked Linghu Chong's head gently and then turned around to go down the cliff.

Linghu Chong followed him all the way till the edge of the cliff. Seeing Feng Qingyang's thin figure receding down the cliff and eventually disappearing in the back mountain, he couldn't help but feel deep sorrow and grief.

During the ten days or so Linghu Chong spent with Feng Qingyang, even though all they discussed about were sword techniques, he admired Feng Qingyang's demeanor with all his heart. On top of that, he also felt that Feng seemed to be so close to him and the two were indescribably congenial. Feng Qingyang was really a Grand Uncle-Master of his who was two generations higher than him, yet deep inside Linghu Chong's heart, he vaguely felt a kind of affection as if Feng was a good friend in his same age group who he had wished to meet all along. Comparing to his relationship to his respectful Master, Yue Buqun, this one seemed to be much closer instead.

"When this Grand Uncle-Master was still young, he probably had the same kind of temper just like me, fearing nothing, carefree, and tending to do things following one's free will," Linghu Chong thought. "When he taught me sword techniques, he always liked to say that 'it's the person using the sword techniques, not the sword techniques using the person' and 'a person is alive,

but sword techniques are not, so an alive person shouldn't be restrained by dead sword techniques.' That principle is so true. Why did Master never say anything close to that?" He pondered over it for a while and then got his own answer. "Of course Master knows about this principle. It's just that he knows well that I am too carefree and is afraid that once he tells me the principle, I would go on wild imaginations to create a mass and won't follow the rules step by step when I practice sword art. Once I get to a certain level with my sword skills, Master will then explain everything in details. Apprentice brothers and sisters aren't there with their level of Kung Fu skills, so of course it would be even more difficult for them to understand the principle of advanced sword art. It would be a waste of time telling them." Then his mind slipped into a different thought. "Grand Uncle-Master's sword skill has really reached the acme of perfection. What a pity it is that he never showed his true skills so I could broaden my horizons. Compared to Master, Grand Uncle Master's sword skill must be another level up."

He remembered that Feng Qingyang's face was always covered by depression. He figured, "During the last ten days or so, Grand Uncle-Master would occasionally heave deep sighs. Obviously he had some kind of a big tragedy in his mind. I wonder what happened to him." He heaved a sigh himself and then went out the cave to practice.

He practiced for a while and then randomly threw out a thrust. It turned out to be the Graceful Phoenix move from Huashan style sword art. He paused for a second and shook his head in a wry smile.

"Wrong!" he said to himself and then continued on. Not long after, he threw out another random thrust, and it turned out to be Graceful Phoenix once again. He couldn't help but get mad at himself.

"Because I know sword moves from our sword school very well, and all those moves are already deep-rooted in my mind, as soon as I become careless, I would naturally add the familiar moves from our school into it. Then it's not Dugu Nine Swords anymore."

Suddenly a thought flashed by his mind. "Grand Uncle-Master told me to have

no restraints and follow the natural flow, then why couldn't I use sword moves from my own school? And furthermore, why couldn't I add Hengshan, Taishan, or other schools' sword moves, or even Demon Cult Ten Elders' Kung Fu into it? If I insisted on separating them, using only certain type of sword art, not another certain type of sword art, then I am really putting restraints onto myself."

After figuring that out, he just randomly threw out different moves. If it followed the natural flow, he would mix sword moves from his own school or moves from the rock wall together. Instantly, he felt endless fun. The sword moves from the five different mountain sword schools were quite different from each other, and the ten Demon Cult Elders also came from six or seven different sects. It was almost impossible to mix moves from so many different styles. After practicing for some moments, he was still not able to merge them together.

"If I can't merge them together, so what? Why do I have to?" he suddenly realized. So he stopped worrying about what move it was and as soon as he thought of a move, he would simply mix it into the Dugu Nine Swords as he pleased. However, out of all those moves, Graceful Phoenix was still the one he used the most. He practiced some more and then threw another random thrust. Not to his surprise, it was Graceful Phoenix once again.

"What might little apprentice sister say once she sees how I am executing that Graceful Phoenix?" he suddenly thought.

He held his sword still as a gentle and soft smile broke out on his face. During the last few days, he had been studying and practicing sword arts with all his heart, even in his dreams he had been only thinking about the various variations of the Dugu Nine Swords. Now when he suddenly remembered Yue Lingshan, lovesick quickly welled up in his heart.

"I wonder if she is still teaching apprentice brother Lin sword art secretly. Master has strict orders, but little apprentice sister has always been very bold. Relying on Master-Wife's spoiling, she probably started teaching again. Even if she's not teaching sword art, they see each other days and nights, so of course

they will become even closer."

Gradually, the gentle smile changed into a wry smile, and eventually there was not a trace of happiness left on his face. Feeling quite depressed, he slid his sword back into the sheath slowly.

Suddenly Lu Dayou's shouting voice rose. "Big apprentice brother! Big apprentice brother!" His voice was filled with worry.

"Oh no! Tian Boguang went down the cliff after a crushing defeat. He had said that he was not going to give up and would keep pestering to the very end. Could it be that since he can't beat me in a fight, he had taken little apprentice sister into hostage so he could force me to surrender?" Linghu Chong was stunned.

He rushed by the edge of the cliff and looked down. Flustered and exasperated, Lu Dayou ran toward the cliff, the food basket in his hands.

"Big…big apprentice brother…big…apprentice brother, this is not good!" Lu Dayou shouted.

"What? What happened to little apprentice sister?" Linghu Chong asked hurriedly, even more worried.

Lu Dayou jumped up the cliff, and after sitting the food basket on a big rock, he said, "Little apprentice sister? Little apprentice sister is just fine. This is terrible. I think it's going to be trouble."

Hearing that little apprentice sister was just fine, Linghu Chong felt quite relieved. "What trouble?" he asked.

"Master and Master-Wife came back." Lu Dayou panted.

Linghu Chong was quite delighted. "Bah! Isn't it a great thing that Master and Master-Wife have come back? Why are you saying that it's going to be trouble? Nonsense!" he reproached.

"No, no, you don't understand. Right after Master and Master-Wife came back, before they even had a chance to rest, many people came to pay a visit, and among the people coming, there are ones from the Songshan Sword School, the

Hengshan Sword School, and the Taishan Sword School," Lu Dayou explained.

"Our five sword schools are all members of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. It's quite normal when people from the Songshan Sword School and the others come to pay a visit to Master," Linghu Chong said.

"No, no…you don't know. There are three others that came together with them and claimed to be part of our Huashan Sword School, but Master doesn't call them apprentice brothers."

"Really? What do those three look like?" Linghu Chong asked, feeling slightly surprised.

"One of them has a yellowish face and claimed to have a surname of Feng,[62] and called something like Feng Buping. Then another one is a Taoist priest; the third one is a short guy. Both of them are called 'Bu' something. I guess they are really ones in the 'Bu' class."

"Maybe they are traitors of our school and had been expelled out of the school a long time ago." Linghu Chong nodded.

"Yeah! You guessed it right. As soon as Master saw them, he became very displeased and said to them, 'Brother Feng, all three of you have had your connection with Huashan Sword School dropped a long time ago. Why are you coming back to Mount Huashan again?' Then that Feng Buping said, 'Apprentice brother Yue, did you buy out Mount Huashan? Are you not allowing other people to come up Mount Huashan? Or did the Emperor grant it to you?' Master snorted and then said, 'If you are just touring around Mount Huashan, of course you have your freedom. Yue Buqun is no longer your apprentice brother. I'll have to send the words 'apprentice brother Yue' right back to you.' Feng Buping said, 'Your Master used schemes and intrigues to seize control of the Huashan Sword School many years ago. We'll have to square the old accounts today. You don't want me to call you 'apprentice brother Yue.' Humph, after we square the old accounts, even if you kneel in front of me to beg for it, I wouldn't grant you the wish.'"

"Oh," Linghu Chong replied, thinking that Master really had trouble this time.

“Us apprentices all got angry at those words.” Lu Dayou continued. “Little apprentice sister was the first one to yell out. Who would have thought that Master-Wife had a real soft temper this time? She didn’t allow little apprentice sister to make any noises. Master obviously didn’t take them too seriously. He said dryly, ‘You want to square accounts? What accounts do you want to square? How do you want to square?’ Feng Buping said loudly, ‘You have usurped the Head Master post of the Huashan Sword School for over twenty years. Haven’t you had enough of it already? Don’t you think it’s time to step down now?’ Master answered with a smile, ‘So all of you took on all the trouble to line up here just so that you can seize my post of Head Master. What’s there to cherish? Brother Feng, if you think you are capable of the Head Master post, of course I can step aside.’ Feng Buping said, ‘Your Master usurped our sword school’s Head Master post using schemes and intrigues many years ago. I have already petitioned to the Five Mountains Sword Alliance Chief Zuo and received the Command Flag to become the new Head Master of the Huashan Sword School in his command.’ He took out a small flag from his chest pocket and extended it out. It is indeed the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance.”

“Isn’t Alliance Chief Zuo a bit too impetuous to think he has the authority here? This is an internal affair of the Huashan Sword School. We don’t need him to poke his nose in that matter. What right has him to decide who should be the Head Master of our Huashan Sword School?” Linghu Chong shouted angrily.

“That’s right! Master-Wife said the same thing. But that Lu-named old guy from the Songshan Sword School, Crane Hands Lu Bai, you know, the old folk we saw at Uncle-Master Liu’s house in Hengshan, he spared no effort backing up that Feng Buping saying that the Feng-named guy should become the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School and argued again and again with Master-Wife. And those two guys from the Taishan Sword School and the Hengshan Sword School, this is so annoying, also ganged up with Feng Buping. The three schools of theirs have decided to gang up to give trouble to our Huashan Sword School. Heng-Shan Sword School is the only one that doesn’t have anyone involved. Big…big apprentice brother, I figured this is going to be big trouble,

that's why I came in a rush to let you know."

"When our school has trouble, as long as us apprentices can still breathe, we are all willing to die for Master. Six apprentice brother, let's go!" Linghu Chong shouted.

"Right! When Master sees that you are working for him, for sure he won't blame you for leaving the cliff without permission," Lu Dayou exclaimed.

"It's alright even if Master do blame me. Master is a courteous gentleman, and he doesn't like to argue with others. Maybe he will actually let someone have the post of Head Master. Wouldn't that be terrible…?" Linghu Chong started rushing down the cliff using his Qing-Gong.

In the middle of running, Linghu Chong suddenly heard somebody shouting from the mountain path in front of him.

"Linghu Chong! Linghu Chong! Where are you?"

"Who is calling my name?" Linghu Chong asked.

"Are you Linghu Chong?" several voices asked in unison.

"That's right!" Linghu Chong answered.

Suddenly two shadows flashed by and blocked in the middle of the road. The mountain path was very narrow and on one side of the path was the ten-thousand-feet deep bottomless valley. When the two men showed up so abruptly on the mountain path all of a sudden, Linghu Chong was in the middle of a fast dash and almost bumped into them. He stopped abruptly and found himself only a foot away from the two. The two faces were both very bumpy and wrinkly and looked very frightening. In great surprise, Linghu Chong immediately turned around and leapt back ten feet or so, shouting, "Who are you?" But to his great astonishment, he found another two extremely ugly faces, also bumpy and wrinkly, blocking his way. The two faces were less than half-a-foot from his face, and their noses almost touched his nose. Linghu Chong immediately took a step to his side and again found two more people standing by his side between him and the bottomless abyss. Their faces were also very similar to the previous

four.

Having bumped into six freaks all of a sudden, Linghu Chong was at a loss as what to do, and his heart pounded like a drum. Within the split of a second, the six freaks had jostled him into a three-inch wide small space. The breaths of the two in front of him had already reached his face. He could also feel warm air on his back neck. Apparently it was because of the breathing from the two behind him. In a hurry, he reached for his sword. However, as soon as his finger touched the handle of the sword, the six freaks took a half step forward all at the same time and jostled with their bodies toward the middle. Instantly, Linghu Chong was squeezed into such a tight space that he couldn't even move an inch.

"Hey, hey! What are you guys doing?" Lu Dayou's voice rose from behind him.

Even though Linghu Chong had a bag full of tricks, at the moment, he was scared out of wits. Those six freaks looked almost like trolls or monsters, and not only did they have scary looks, their behaviors were even more freaky. Linghu Chong tried hard to open his arms so he could push away the two in front of him, but with his arms being jostled down, he had no way of pushing.

"They must be villains together with Feng Buping's group," he thought to himself hurriedly.

His entire body felt the great pressure; he couldn't even breathe. The four freaks kept jostling toward the middle and soon Linghu Chong's joints started popping. Not daring to stare right into the eyes of the freak right in front of him, Linghu Chong quickly shut his eyes tight. Then he heard a screeching voice.

"Linghu Chong, we'll take you to see the little nun."

"Oh, no! So they are Tian Boguang's gang." Linghu Chong thought to himself.

"If you don't let go of me, I'll commit suicide with my sword! Linghu Chong would rather die…!" he shouted.

Suddenly, Linghu Chong felt two hands grabbing onto both of his arms. The grips were as tight as clamps. Even though he had learned the Dugu Nine

Swords, he had no means of using it at all. He groaned inwardly.

“The good little nun wants to see you. Behave yourself. Be a good kid, too,” another voice rose.

“It would not be good if you become dead. If you commit suicide, I’ll beat you half dead half alive,” a third one said.

“He would be completely dead already. Why would you still beat him half dead half alive?” someone else argued.

“If you want to scare him, don’t let him hear you. Once he hears it, he won’t fall for it,” another one commented.

“I just like to scare him, what are you gonna do about it?” the previous one mocked.

“I think it’s better to talk him into behaving himself,” another one suggested.

“I said to scare him, and I will scare him,” the previous one said.

“I like to talk him out of it,” that another one insisted.

The two actually went on arguing against each other nonstop.

Linghu Chong listened as the two argued foolishly. He was both greatly shocked and annoyed. He thought to himself, “The six freaks have very high Kung Fu skills, however, they seemed to be really stupid.” So he shouted, “It’s useless to try to scare me or talk me out of it. If you don’t let go of me, I’ll bite off my tongue and kill myself.”

Suddenly, great pain came from his cheeks. Someone had grabbed onto his jaw.

“This guy is really stubborn. If he bites off his tongue, he won’t be able to talk. The little nun won’t like that for sure,” one voice said.

“If he bites off his tongue, he would be dead. Why would it matter if he can still talk or not?” another one argued.

“He might not die. If you don’t believe me, you can bite your own to try it out,” a third one suggested.

“I said he would die, so I won’t bite off my own tongue. Why don’t you try it out?” the previous one mocked.

“Why should I bite my own tongue off? I got it. Let him try it,” the one spoke before him replied.

There came a loud cry from Lu Dayou. Apparently those freaks had captured him.

“You, bite off your own tongue and let’s see if you will die or not? Hurry up! Bite!” one freak yelled.

“I won’t! If I bite my tongue off, I’d be dead for sure,” Lu Dayou shouted.

“That’s right! If one bites his tongue off, he would be dead for sure! Even he said so too,” one of the freaks said.

“He’s not dead yet. His words are not dependable,” another one argued.

“He didn’t bite off his tongue, so of course he won’t die. If he did, he would die!” a third one commented.

Linghu Chong gathered his strength and jerked his arms abruptly. Instantly the pain from his wrists went deep into his marrow, yet he was still not even able to move a single bit. In the instant, he suddenly hit upon a way out of the trouble. He let out a loud scream and then pretended to be out cold. The six freaks all cried out in surprise. The one who grabbed at Linghu Chong’s cheeks immediately let go of them.

“He was scared to death!” a freak commented.

“He can’t be scared to death. He’s not that big of a loser,” another one disagreed.

“Even if he’s dead, he wasn’t scared to death,” a third one suggested.

“Then how did he die?” the previous one asked.

Lu Dayou actually believed that they had tortured big apprentice brother to death and burst into a loud cry.

“I think he was scared to death,” a freak insisted.

“You grabbed him too hard. He was grabbed to death,” another one suggested.

“How on earth did he die?” a third one questioned.

“I shut down my arteries and killed myself!” Linghu Chong shouted loudly.

The six freaks were shocked when they suddenly heard Linghu Chong talking, then they all broke into loud laughs and said, “Aha, he’s not dead. He was pretending to be dead.”

“I wasn’t pretending. After I died I came back to life again,” Linghu Chong claimed.

“Do you really know how to shut down your arteries? That must be a very difficult Kung Fu. Will you teach me?” a freak asked.

“The Shut Down Your Own Arteries Kung Fu is very advanced. This dude doesn’t know it. He’s lying to you,” another freak said.

“Did you say I don’t know it? If I don’t know it, how could I have shut down my arteries and killed myself earlier?” Linghu Chong challenged.

“Well…well…that’s really odd.” The freak scratched his head and didn’t know how to answer.

Linghu Chong now was sure that even though the six freaks had excellent Kung Fu skills, their brains were certainly dull-witted to the extreme. So he said, “If you don’t let go of me, I am going to shut down my arteries again. After I die this time, I won’t be able to come back to life any more.”

The two freaks that had been grabbing onto Linghu Chong’s wrists tightly immediately let go of him and said in unison, “You can’t die. If you die, it would be terrible.”

“Well, if you don’t want me dead, you’ll have to move aside and let me through. I got to take care of some important business,” Linghu Chong suggested.

The two freaks blocking his way shook their heads at the same time, both to the left and then both to the right. “No way! No way! You have to come with us

to see the little nun," they said in unison.

Linghu Chong gathered his inner energy and jumped up, hoping to be able to jump over the two freaks' heads. But to his surprise, the two freaks also jumped up in great speed and their two bodies made a flying wall that blocked Linghu Chong's path again. Linghu Chong's body bumped with the two freaks' bodies and fell back down to the ground.

While still in mid-air, Linghu Chong had already grabbed hold of his sword handle. He waved his arm to draw his sword, but suddenly felt great burdens on both of his shoulders. The two freaks behind him had each reached out with an arm and placed a hand on each of his shoulders. His sword was only about a foot out of the sheath and he simply could not draw it out. The two hands on his shoulders each seemed to have weighed hundreds of pounds. His body was immediately pushed lower. He couldn't even stand straight, not mentioning drawing his sword.

"Let's carry him away!" after the two freaks pushed him down onto the ground, they suggested with big smiles.

The two freaks in front of Linghu Chong each reached out with a hand to grab onto his ankles and picked him off the ground.

"Hey! Hey! What are you doing?" Lu Dayou shouted.

"This chap is so annoying. Let's kill him!" a freak suggested and raised his palm high, ready to strike down onto Lu Dayou's head.

"Don't kill him! Don't kill him!" Linghu Chong cried out loudly.

"Alright, I'll listen to you. I won't kill him. I'll seal his Mute Acupoint instead," that freak replied. He didn't even bother turning around and simply pointed backward with his finger. In a whistling sound, he had sealed Lu Dayou's Mute Acupoint with a beam of energy. Lu Dayou was in the middle of screaming, but the scream suddenly stopped abruptly as if someone had cut his scream off using a pair of scissors, and his body immediately huddled up.

Linghu Chong had rarely seen such accuracy and mighty power demonstrated

in the freak's acupoint-sealing skills; he couldn't help but show great admiration.

"Excellent Kung Fu!" he praised.

The freak was greatly pleased. "This is nothing! I have a lot more cool Kung Fu skills. Let me demonstrate a few of them for you," he said with a big smile.

If it were in normal days, Linghu Chong would have wanted to broaden his horizons, but at the moment he really worried about his Master's safety and was very anxious.

"I don't want to watch!" he shouted.

"Why don't you want to watch? You'll have to watch!" the freak said angrily.

He jumped into the air and flew over Linghu Chong and the four freaks holding Linghu Chong like a big bird. His body maintained a horizontal position when he flew in the air and looked as if he was a swallow gliding in the air with beautiful postures.

"Beautiful!" Linghu Chong couldn't help but blurt out another praise.

The freak landed back to the ground smoothly and gently, without even bringing up any dust. By the time he turned around, great smiles piled up on his long horsy face.

"This is really nothing! I've got a lot more even better than that," he said happily.

He was at least somewhere close to sixty or seventy years old, yet his temper and the way he behaved was just like a little kid that wanted to keep showing off as soon as someone praised him. The superb and profound Kung Fu and the childish and naïve behavior of him happened to be on the exact opposite in extreme.

Linghu Chong thought, "Master and Master-Wife are in trouble right now surrounded by tough enemy. The enemy has all those Songshan Sword School, Taishan Sword School, and the bunch of elite fighters to back him, even if I go over there, the situation wouldn't be approved much. Why don't I trick these

freaks into going over there to help Master and Master-Wife out?" So he shook his head and said, "You guys' little Kung Fu is far from good enough to show off here on Mount Huashan."

"Far from good enough? What are you talking about? You got caught by us, didn't you?" that freak rebuffed.

"I am just a nobody in the Huashan Sword School. What's so difficult to beat me? Right now, there are many elite master hands from Songshan Sword School, Taishan Sword School, Hengshan Sword School, and Huashan Sword School gathered here at Mount Huashan. Of course you guys wouldn't be brave enough to go provoke them, would you?" Linghu Chong bluffed.

"Why would we be afraid to provoke them? Where are they?" the freak asked.

"We won the bet with that little nun, so the little nun asked us to come get Linghu Chong. She never asked us to provoke any elite master hands from the Songshan Sword School or the Taishan Sword School. We should only do one favor for one win. If we do too many favors, it's not worth it. Let's go," another one suggested.

Hearing those words, Linghu Chong felt very relieved. "It turned out that they were sent by little apprentice sister Yilin. Then they must not be enemies of mine. It seemed that they had lost a bet and thus had to come to get me. It's funny that they still want to save their faces and claim to have actually won the bet instead."

"That's a good idea," he said. "The elite master hand from the Songshan Sword School said that he looked down the most upon those six old freaks with horsy faces that looked like tangerine skins, and as soon as he sees the six of them, he would nip them dead one by one like nipping puny ants. Too bad that as soon as those six old freaks hear his voice, they all immediately ran far way and there was no way for him to find them."

At these words, the six freaks roared in great outrage. The four of them who had been carrying Linghu Chong sat him back down on the ground and then shouted all together.

“Where is this guy? Take us to him. We’d like a fight with him.”

“What about the Songshan Sword School or the Taishan Sword School? Humph! Peach Valley’s Six Fairies think nothing of them.”

“Is he insane or something? How dare he nip Peach Valley’s Six Fairies dead like nipping puny ants?”

“Well, you call yourselves Peach Valley’s Six Fairies, but he kept on calling you Peach Valley’s Six Trolls, or sometimes Peach Valley’s Six Kids. I’d advise the Six Fairies of you to better stay as far away from him as possible. That guy’s Kung Fu is so vicious. You don’t stand a chance fighting him,” Linghu Chong added.

“No way! No way! Let’s go fight him and see who’s better,” a freak shouted out.

“I think this doesn’t look too good. If that elite master hand from the Songshan Sword School dares to say so, he must have superb skills to back himself up. He had called us Peach Valley’s Six Kids, then he probably is a senior master of ours, and we probably can’t beat him in a fight. The less trouble we have to deal with, the better. Why don’t we go back now?” another freak suggested.

“Sixth brother has the least guts. We haven’t even had the fight yet. How do you know we can’t beat him?” another one exclaimed.

“What if he really can nip us dead like nipping ants? Wouldn’t that be real bad luck? And after we fight him, we’d all be nipped dead already, how could we run away by then?” the coward freak asked.

“That’s right!” Linghu Chong laughed out loud inwardly. “If you want to run away, you need to hurry up. If he gets the news and then comes after you, you won’t have enough time to run away by then.”

Hearing these words, the coward freak immediately started running. Only after a blurry flash, he had already vanished from everyone’s sight.

“Wow, he’s gotten really excellent Qing-Gong skills.” Linghu Chong thought

to himself in surprise.

“Sixth brother has no guts. It’s alright that he ran away. We’ll go fight that elite master hand from the Songshan Sword School,” a freak proposed.

“Let’s go! Let’s go! Peach Valley’s Six Fairies are undefeatable! Why would we be afraid of him?” the rest of the freaks all agreed.

“Hurry up and take us over there. Let’s see how he’ll nip us dead like nipping puny ants,” a freak said as he patted on Linghu Chong’s shoulder gently.

“Well, I can take you over, but as a true man, I, Linghu Chong, will never let others force me into doing things. I really resented it when I heard that Songshan Sword School elite master hand ridicule the six of you left and right. Also because I admired the superb Kung Fu of yours very much, that’s why I am volunteering to take you over there from a sense of justice so you can get even with him. If you force me to do this or that simply because you have more bodies here, I’ll never do it even if I have to die!” Linghu Chong announced.

“Great! You have quite some integrity and sharp eyes too to be able to see that the six brothers of us have superb Kung Fu skills. We brothers admire you too!” the five freaks all applauded.

“If so, I’d be glad to take you guys over there. When you see him, you must not speak or act irresponsibly, so people in the Martial World won’t hold you guys for ridicule and say that Peach Valley Six Fairies are naive, childish and lack common sense. You have to all listen to my instructions, otherwise, you will make me lose face greatly and we’ll all look stupid,” Linghu Chong said.

He was just testing water here. Who would have thought that the five freaks immediately agreed with no complaints whatsoever?

“That’s perfect! We can’t ever let others call us, Peach Valley’s Six Fairies, naive, childish and lack common sense!” the five of them answered in unison.

Apparently they have heard those words “naive, childish and lack common sense” many times already, and considered them very embarrassing comments. Linghu Chong’s words were almost like music to their ears.

“Good. Will you please follow me?” Linghu Chong nodded at them and then hurried down the mountain path.

The five freaks followed right behind Linghu Chong carrying Lu Dayou with them. Only after a couple of miles, they found the coward freak popping his head up and down to peek out from behind a big rock. Linghu Chong figured that this one definitely needed some encouragement, so he said to him.

“That Songshan Sword School’s old folk’s Kung Fu is far from yours. You don’t need to be afraid of him. We are going there to kick his ass. Why don’t you come with us?”

“Great! I am going too!” the freak said with great joy. However, he immediately asked again, “Well, you said that his Kung Fu is far from mine. Is his Kung Fu far better than mine or far worse?” He was quite timid, so naturally he was very cautious.

“Of course yours is far better than his. When you were running earlier, I could tell that you have outstanding Qing-Gong skills. That old folk from the Songshan Sword School will never be able to keep up with you,” Linghu Chong said with a grin.

That freak was very pleased and decided to join the group, walking next to Linghu Chong, but he still wasn’t too sure about it, and asked, “What if he did catch up with me? What then?”

“I’ll always be by your side, and if he ever dares to catch up with you, humph! Humph!” Linghu Chong pulled his sword half a foot out of the sheath and then snapped it back in with a forceful push. “I’ll whack him with a single thrust!” he said.

“Wonderful! Wonderful! Hey, you have to keep your words!” the freak said with great joy!

“Of course! If he can’t keep up with you, then I don’t need to kill him,” Linghu Chong promised.

“Sure! If he can’t keep up with me, then we’ll let him go.” The freak smiled

happily.

Linghu Chong laughed hard inwardly. He thought to himself, "Once you start running, I am sure it wouldn't be an easy task to keep up with you!" He then figured, "These six old folks are unsophisticated and honest. They aren't bad guys. It wouldn't be a bad idea to make acquaintances with them." So he spoke again.

"Six Fairies, your names have long resounded in my ears! Today I finally get to meet all of you. And sure enough, you all live up to your reputation. I was wondering what are the respectful names of the six of you?"

The six freaks had no idea that what Linghu Chong just said was totally illogical, and as soon as they heard him saying that their names had long resounded in his ears, all were wild with joy.

"I am the big brother. My name is Peachtree Root Fairy," one said.

"I am the second. My name is Peachtree Trunk Fairy," another one said.

"I am either the third or the fourth. My name is Peachtree Branch Fairy," a third one said. He pointed at a fourth one and said, "He is either the third or the fourth. His name is Peachtree Leaf Fairy."

"How come you don't even know if you are the third or the fourth yourselves?" Linghu Chong asked in surprise.

"It's not that we don't know. It's because my mom and dad forgot about it," Branch Fairy explained.

"When your mom and dad gave birth to you, if they forgot that they had ever given birth to you, as a little kid, how would you know if there's a you in the world?" Leaf Fairy interrupted.

"Right! Right! Luckily my parents remembered that they gave birth to me." Linghu Chong nodded while working hard to hold his laugh.

"Here you go!" Leaf Fairy said.

"So how did your parents forget about it?" Linghu Chong asked.

“At the time when Mom and Dad gave birth to us, the two brothers, they remembered who was the elder one and who was the younger one, however, they forgot about it a few years later. That’s why we don’t really know who is the third and who is the fourth,” Leaf Fairy said. He pointed at Branch Fairy and said, “He really wanted to be the third, and if I don’t call him third brother, he would start a fist fight with me. So I had to let him have it.”

“So you are two brothers.” Linghu Chong smiled.

“Yeah! We are six brothers!” Branch Fairy said.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, “Well, parents are dumb parents, no wonder they gave birth to six dumb sons.”

“What are you two’s names?” Linghu Chong asked the rest two.

“Let me tell him. I am the sixth. My name is Peachtree Fruit Fairy. My fifth brother is named Peachtree Flower Fairy,” the coward freak announced.

Linghu Chong was unable to stifle a laugh, thinking, “The Peachtree Flower Fairy has such an ugly face. He really has nothing even comparable to a peach tree flower.”

Seeing Linghu Chong’s smiling face, Flower Fairy said happily, “Among the six brothers, my name is the most beautiful one. Theirs are no match for mine!”

“Peachtree Flower Fairy is such a pleasant name, and Peachtree Root, Peachtree Trunk, Peachtree Branch, Peachtree Leaf, and Peachtree Fruit are all beautiful names too. Wonderful! Wonderful! If I could have a name so beautiful and pleasant, I’d be delighted beyond words.”

Every one of the six Fairies felt unspeakable happiness and couldn’t help but dance with joy, feeling that Linghu Chong was truly the number one nice guy in the world.

“Let’s keep going now. Will one of the Peachtree brothers please open my apprentice brother’s acupoint? Your acupoint-sealing techniques are way too advanced for me. There’s no way I’ll be able to open his acupoint all by myself,” Linghu Chong said with a smile.

Each getting a flattery, Peach Valley Six Fairies immediately vied with each other in rushing by Lu Dayou to open his sealed acupoints.

From the "Cliff of Contemplation" to the "House of Integrity" of the Huashan Sword School, it was somewhere between three or four miles. Other than Lu Dayou, everybody had good Qing-Gong skills and it took them almost no time to arrive at the outside of "House of Integrity." As soon as they got there, Linghu Chong saw Lao Denuo, Liang Fa, Shi Daizi, Yue Lingshan, Lin Pingzhi, and the bunch of dozens of apprentice brothers and sisters all standing outside of the hall way looking quite worried. Seeing that the big apprentice brother had arrived, everyone felt a bit relieved.

Lao Denuo greeted them and whispered to Linghu Chong, "Big apprentice brother, Master and Master-Wife are greeting guests inside."

Linghu Chong turned his head back and signaled Peach Valley Six Fairies to not make any sound while they stand there waiting.

"Those six are my friends. You don't have to worry about them. Let me go have a look," he whispered to Lao Denuo and then peeked inside from the crack of the hall windows.

Normally when Yue Buqun and Madam Yue greet guests, apprentices would never have peeked in from the outside, however, since the Huashan Sword School was in great trouble right now, all the apprentices didn't think what Linghu Chong did was anything inappropriate at all.

Notes

[←1]

Fuzhou is the capital of Fujian Province, which is in the southeast part of China, just across the strait from Taiwan.

[←2]

Note here that Pingzhi is actually the first name. In China, one's family name is always placed before one's first name to show respect to the family heritage. The same applies to all names mentioned in the story.

[←3]

Bamboo Green is the name of a very famous Chinese wine. It got its name because the color of the wine is like the leaves of bamboo.

[←4]

Tael is a unit of weight (about 32.5 grams). It was popular as the unit for silver currency in ancient China.

[←5]

Sichuan is a province south of central China. It is far away from the province of Fujian and is famous for its very spicy food.

[←6]

In ancient China, it was considered low class for people to not wear anything on their legs.

[←7]

It is an old tradition in China that when a relative or an official in great power dies, people tie white cloth on their foreheads to show respect.

[←8]

Marquis Zhuge Liang was a very famous and well-respected military counselor in Sichuan of ancient China. (See his story in “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” by Luo Guanzhong.)

[←9]

To kneel and touch the forehead to the ground in expression of deep respect, worship, or submission, as formerly done in ancient China.

[←10]

Hunan is a neighboring province northwest of Fujian Province.

[←11]

See the story “Romance of the Three Kingdoms” by Luo Guanzhong.

[←12]

Qingcheng and Emei are two famous mountains in Sichuan Province. Martial arts groups tend to name themselves after either the style of their martial arts, or the name of the place they live in.

[←13]

In Taoism and Buddhism, the high-level monks or Taoists will shut themselves in a cave or somewhere secluded to meditate for a few weeks or months, without seeing anyone. They believe this kind of meditation is helpful in their studies.

[←14]

Luoyang is a large city in Henan Province, which is far northwest from Fujian Province.

[←15]

Shaolin is a Buddhist temple in Henan Province. Its monks are very famous for the Shaolin style martial arts form. Wutang is a Taoist temple in Hubei Province. It is the second most famous martial arts group after Shaolin. The well-known Tai-Chi martial arts form was created by Wutang.

[←16]

In Chinese, “Shan” stands for mountain. These are five large mountains in central, eastern, southern, western and northern China. People call them the Five Mountains. Two of these have the same pronunciation, so we will be distinguishing them by using Hengshan and Heng-Shan. They are: Central: Songshan (Henan Province);
Eastern: Taishan (Shandong Province);
Southern: Hengshan (Hunan Province);
Western: Huashan (Shanxi Province);
Northern: Heng-Shan (Hebei Province).

[←17]

This is a Chinese way of greeting, by cupping one fist with the palm of another hand and bowing slightly.

[←18]

In the Chinese zodiac, an animal represents each year. There are a total of twelve animals, and the cycle starts over every twelve years.

[←19]

This is a very famous dish in China. It got its name from a story: The smell of the dish was so good that the monk next door climbed over the wall to steal it.

[←20]

In ancient China, people did not have glass to seal their windows. Instead, they used paper to seal the frames.

[←21]

“Ying Xiong Hao Jie” is a Chinese phrase meaning heroes. The four great apprentices of Qingcheng each use one character in their names. Yu Renhao is using the character “Hao.”

[←22]

When Chinese martial artists name their moves, they always like to use names from legendary stories. Zhong Kui was half-god half-human in Chinese mythology and he had the special power to drive evil spirits away.

[←23]

According to Chinese martial art and medical procedures, there are many “acupoints” on a human body. By pinning or hitting them, you can disable the movements of muscles, blood flow or information flow from the nerves. Fang Renzhi hit their acupoints so that they could not move and had to stay still.

[←24]

In ancient China, polygamy was legal and common among rich people.

[←25]

A general term for certain two-stringed bowed instruments, popular in ancient China.

[←26]

An ancient breathing exercise that helps improve health and develop extra power and strength (sometimes an almost magical power that cannot be explained by science).

[←27]

Beggars Clan was a group made up of beggars. Members of the Beggars Clan used the number of bags carried to identify his status in the clan. When a new member joined the clan, he would be carrying only one bag. The higher his status was, the more bags he would be carrying.

[←28]

Like it was mentioned in chapter one, Ying Xiong Hao Jie means “heroes” in Chinese.

[←29]

In Chinese, “Lu” has the same pronunciation as the number six.

[←30]

Uncle-Master is the title used when a junior calls a senior master who is the apprentice brother/sister of the junior's Master. It is used regardless of the gender of the senior master.

[←31]

Pronounced as “hur”, not “he.”

[←32]

A form of Chinese Martial Arts that will allow the practitioner to jump higher and further, or run faster than an average person. The technique uses a combination of physical exercises and breathing exercises.

[←33]

“Bull-nose” is a mean name for Taoist Priests.

[←34]

In Chinese, Huiyan means attracting the wild geese back.

[←35]

It was a unique phenomenon for eunuchs to exist in Ancient Chinese. Chinese Emperors always had thousands of wives in the palace. Men were needed in the palace for many tasks, but the Emperor was afraid that these men would have affairs with his wives, so all men who wanted to work in the palace had to be castrated to ensure that no affairs would happen. It isn't known when exactly this started, but one can trace it back to at least 2,000 years ago.

[←36]

In Chinese, the character of Lin (meaning “Woods”) is made up of two Mu characters (meaning “Tree, or wood”).

[←37]

In Buddhism, monks and nuns are required to shave their heads, but in Taoism, Taoist Priests are not required to shave their heads.

[←38]

“Xiang” is another name of Hunan Province.

[←39]

According to Buddhism beliefs, there are eighteen levels of hell. The eighteenth level is the bottom-most one, and also the worst one. When one dies, he falls to one of levels of the hells. The smaller the number, the better it is, because then he can be reborn sooner. If one falls to the eighteenth level of hell, then he will have to spend eternity in hell, with no chance of being reborn.

[←40]

In Chinese philosophy and religion, there are two principles – one negative, dark and feminine (Yin) and one positive, bright, and masculine (Yang) – from whose interaction produce all things and dissolve all things. Here, Mu Gaofeng is referring to a method of having intercourse with multiple females and using the energy absorbed to nourish one's own health. This method is actually recorded in ancient Chinese medicine books, but most people consider this pornography.

[←41]

A Buddhist’s way of praying.

[←42]

The Chinese character ‘hu’ is a combination of the character ‘dog’ and the character ‘melon’.

[←43]

Bodhisattva Guanyin is a very famous Buddha. Most believe Bodhisattva Guanyin is a female, but others believe Bodhisattva Guanyin is a male. He/she is the main Buddha nuns pray to.

[←44]

Blunderbuss shots and music/drums were typical in ancient China as formal greetings to government officials. Gongs were used in front of the official's wagon to inform people on the street to yield the way for the government official. People blocking the way would be thrown into prison right away.

[←45]

Also explained in chapter two: A general term for certain two-stringed bowed music instruments, popular in ancient China.

[←46]

Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi are both famous philosophers in ancient China. Lao Zi started Taoism, and Zhuang Zi is a good scholar in Taoism.

[←47]

Sima Zhao was an emperor of Jin Dynasty in ancient China.

[←48]

The Four Books and the Five Classics are books from ancient China. They were used as standard textbooks for people to study with.

The Four Books are:

The Great Learning (Da-Xue) The Doctrine of the Mean (Zhong-Yong) The Analects of Confucius (Lun-Yu) Mencius (Meng-Zi)

The Five Classics are:

The book of Songs (Shi-Jing) The Book of History (Shu-Jing) The Book of Changes (Yi-Jing) The Book of Rites (Li-Ji) The Sprig and Autumn Annals (Chun-Qiu)

[←49]

Xiucai: one who passed the imperial examination at the county level in the Ming and Qing dynasties.

[←50]

Zhuangyuan: title conferred on the one who came first in the highest imperial examination.

[←51]

A pyramid-shaped dumpling made of glutinous rice wrapped in bamboo or reed leaves (normally eaten during the Dragon Boat Festival).

[←52]

The town of Dragon-Spring in Zhejiang Province is well known for making quality blades.

[←53]

Shanxi Province, where Mount Huashan is. It’s at the northwest part of China.

[←54]

Reminder: Fujian province is the Province Lin Pingzhi came from. The Fortune Prestige Escort House Headquarters was located at Fuzhou, which is the capital of Fujian Province.

[←55]

Reminder: Qing-Gong is a form of Chinese Martial Arts that will allow the practitioner to jump higher and further or run faster than an average person. The technique is a combination of muscle exercises and breathing exercises.

[←56]

Reminder: Qi-Gong is an ancient breathing exercise that helps improve health and acquire extra power and strength (sometimes an almost magical power that can not be explained by science).

[←57]

Chang-An is today's Xi'an city in Shanxi Province (Provincial capital). It was the capital for many dynasties including Tang Dynasty. It was considered one of the most populous cities in ancient China.

[←58]

This might be confusing. Shanxi (third intonation) province and Shan-Xi (first intonation) province are actually two neighboring provinces. Shan-Xi province is famous for it’s coalmines, wine, and vinegar. But Mount Huashan and Chang-An are in Shanxi province.

[←59]

Li Taiba, also called Li Bai, was a famous poet during Tang Dynasty. He was nicknamed the Fairy of Poem because of his exceptional talent in poems and Fairy of Wine because he loved drinking wine. The “Banished Fairy Wine House” was named after him hence he was banished by the Royal Court because of his drinking problem.

[←60]

In Chinese language, character “Hu” means fox. Tian Boguang is implying that Linghu Chong is as cunning as a fox.

[←61]

Emei in Chinese genuinely means beautiful women. Emei sting here has nothing to do with Emei Sect mentioned earlier in the novel. It's used because the weapon is specifically used by women.

[←62]

Just want to clarify that the character Feng here is a different one from the Feng in Feng Qingyang's name.