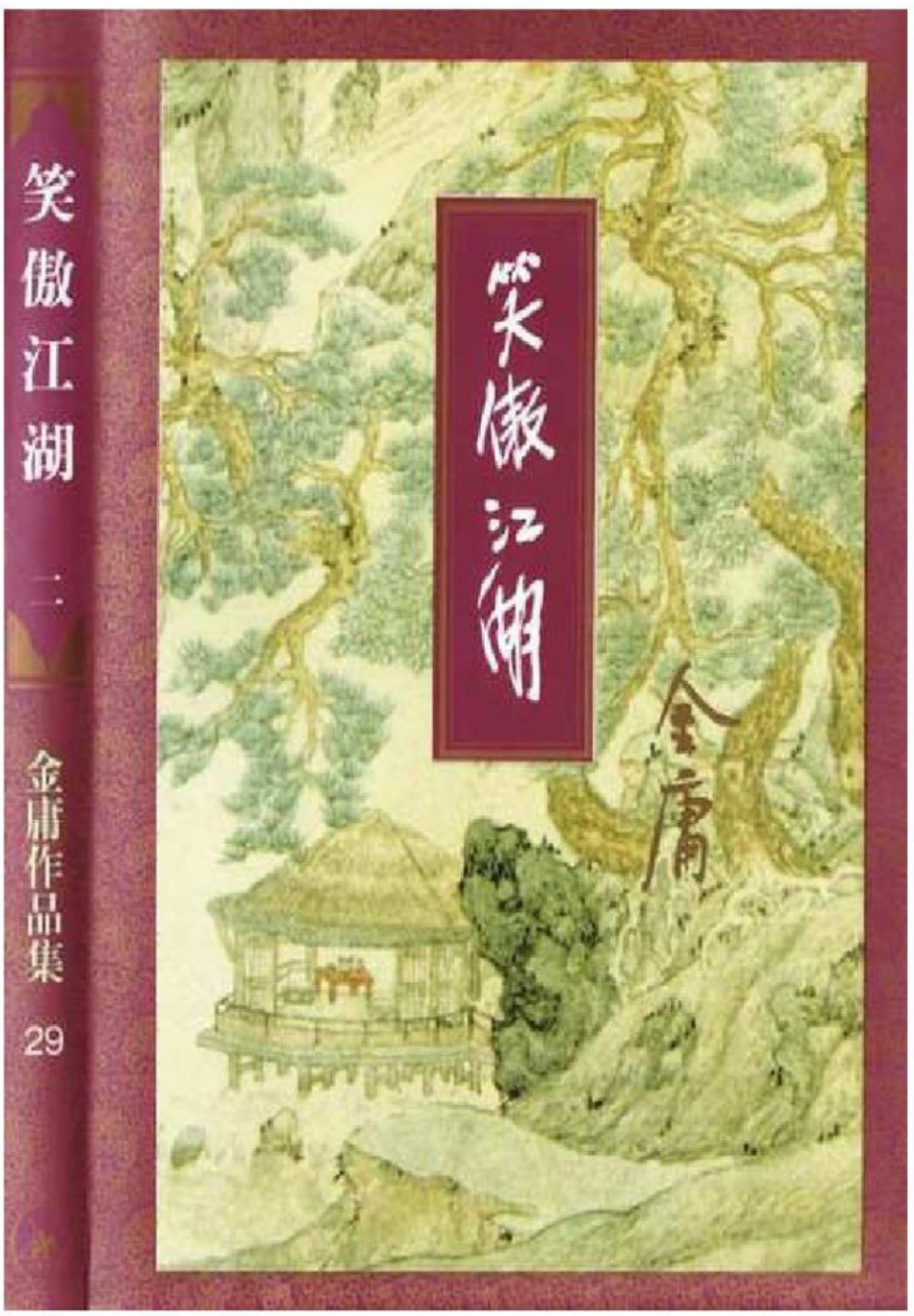
Xiào Ào Jiāng Hú
Smiling Proud Wanderer Vol 02

by

Jin Yong



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Bliss

Editor:

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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://tu-shu-guan.blogspot.tw/

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 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[1] 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,[2] 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.

Chapter 11: Energy Streams

Translated by Lanny Lin



In a state of wooziness, Linghu Chong felt agitating pain from his chest, and his blood seemed to have gone in every direction, it was such an undesirable discomfort. After a long while, he gradually gained back his consciousness. His body seemed to have been roasted in a huge oven. He could not help groaning. Then he heard someone saying, "Be quiet."

Linghu Chong peeked inside the hall. A tall, thin old man sat at the guest of honor seat. He was holding the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance in his right hand; it was none other than “Crane Hands” Lu Bai from the Songshan School. A middle-aged Taoist Priest and an old man in his fifties sat

next to him. Their clothing suggested that one belonged to the Taishan School and the other one the Hengshan School. Next to them sat three more people all in their fifties or sixties and each had a Huashan School style long sword hanging by his waist. The first one had a yellowish face with a stern look. He was probably the Feng Buping that Lou Dayou had mentioned earlier. Master and Master-Wife sat at the host seats in accompany. Tea and light refreshments occupied most of the tabletop.

"Brother Yue," the old man from the Hengshan School said, "we outsiders really shouldn't interfere with the internal affairs of your respectful school. However, because our five sword schools have joined the alliance to share both honor and disgrace, if one school didn't handle things well and became the laughing stock of fellow martial people, the other four schools would be disgraced as well. Earlier, Madam Yue said that the three schools, Songshan, Taishan, and Hengshan should only mind their own business. I think that was inaccurate." His two eyes were almost completely yellow as if he had a yellow fever.

"They are still in the middle of the dispute. Master hasn't given up and stepped down from his post yet." Linghu Chong felt some relief.

"Apprentice brother Lu, it sounds like you are determined that our Huashan School is not handling things properly and that has implicated your respectful school's reputation, aren't you?" Madam Yue asked.

The old man Lu from the Hengshan School sneered. "I've long heard that Heroine Ning is the backstage Head Master of the Huashan School. I didn't want to believe it before, but after having the pleasure to meet you today, I have to agree that it is really a well-deserved reputation."

"Apprentice brother Lu, you've come here to Mount Huashan as a guest. I don't want to offend you because that would be an inappropriate way to treat a guest. Who would have expected such absurd nonsense from a famous master of the Hengshan School? When I see Great Mr. Mo next time, I'm sure I will discuss about this with him," Madam Yue rebuffed angrily.

“Madam Yue, so you are holding off your offense only because I am a guest here, and if this wasn’t Mount Huashan, you would have slashed your sword toward my head, wouldn’t you?” the old man Lu said with a sneer.

“I wouldn’t dare.” Madam Yue replied. “How dare our Huashan School interfere with the internal affair of your respectful school? When people from your respectful school collaborate with the Demon Cult, there’s always Alliance Chief Zuo of the Songshan School to clean him out for you. What’s the need for our Huashan School to get involved?”

Hengshan School’s Liu Zhengfeng and Demon Cult Elder Qu Yang died outside of Hengshan Town together. It had become public knowledge in the Martial World that the Songshan School was responsible for it. Madam Yue specifically mentioned the incident here, to first jab at the old man Lu’s sore spot, and secondly, to ridicule him, implying that he not only didn’t have any grievance of losing an apprentice brother to the Songshan School, but instead, came together with the Songshan School people to give trouble to the Yue Couple.

The old man Lu immediately put on a stern face. “Throughout the ages, which school is immune of unworthy apprentices?” he screeched. “That’s exactly the reason why we have come to Mount Huashan today, to uphold justice and help brother Feng clean out the evil bunch in the school.”

“Who is the evil bunch? My husband Yue Buqun’s nickname is ‘Gentleman Sword.’ What’s your nickname?” Madam Yue said coldly as she grabbed onto her sword handle.

The old man Lu blushed, yet he didn’t answer the question and only eyed Madam Yue angrily with his two yellow piercing eyes.

The old man was a master of the Hengshan School. However, he didn’t have much fame in the Martial World. Linghu Chong had no clue about his identity, so he turned his head back and asked Lao Denuo.

“Who is he? What’s his nick name?”

Linghu Chong knew that before Lao Denuo joined the Huashan School, he

had Kung Fu skills already and also much knowledge about all kinds of anecdotes of the Martial World. Sure enough, Lao Denuo knew this one.

"This old folk's name is Lu Lianrong," Lao Denuo answered in whisper. "His formal nickname is 'Golden-eyed Eagle,' but because he is always gossipy and meddlesome, quite annoying all the time, so everybody called him 'Golden-eyed Crow', instead, behind his back."

Linghu Chong grinned. He thought, "Probably no one dared to call him that unpleasant nickname to his face, but as time went by, it would eventually come to his attention. When Master-Wife asked him about his nickname, he obviously knew that she was referring to 'Golden-eyed Crow' not 'Golden-eyed Eagle'."

Lu Lianrong snorted angrily. ""Gentleman Sword?' 'Hypocrite Sword' is probably more appropriate."

Witnessing such audacious behavior of humiliating the Master right to his face, Linghu Chong could no longer hold his anger. "You damn blind crow! Get your ass out here if you've got any guts!" he shouted out.

Yue Buqun had heard Linghu Chong talking with Lau Denuo outside and had been wondering, "How come Chong has come down the cliff?" Now hearing Linghu Chong's shouting, he reproved at once

"Chong, behave yourself. Uncle-Master is a guest here, how can you speak with such disrespect?"

Anger swept Lu Lianrong, and it seemed as if fire almost shot out of his piercing eyes. He had heard before how the Huashan School head apprentice Linghu Chong had run wild in Hengshan Town, so he yelled back.

"I was wondering who that might be. So it's the chap who went whoring in Hengshan Town! Huashan School surely houses a lot of talents."

"That's right! When I went whoring in Hengshan Town, I slept with a bitch named Lu!" Linghu Chong grinned.

"You…you, stop the nonsense!" Yue Buqun yelled at Linghu Chong angrily.

Seeing his Master getting angry, Linghu Chong dared not to say another word,

while Lu Bai, Feng Buping, and the bunch simply couldn't help but grin.

Lu Lianrong turned around abruptly and kicked out with his left foot. With a loud bang, a frame of the long window was knocked flying in the air. He had never met Linghu Chong before, so he pointed at the general direction of the Huashan School apprentices and yelled.

"Which dirty swine said that?"

All the Huashan School apprentices stood silently and no one answered.

"God damn it! Which dirty swine just said that?" Lu Lianrong swore again.

"You were the only one talking. How would I know what kind of dirty swine you are?" Linghu Chong said with a big grin.

Lu Lianrong's anger exploded. With a loud roar, he jumped onto Linghu Chong. Seeing the vicious force coming toward him, Linghu Chong leapt back. Suddenly, a shadow flashed as someone drifted out from inside the hall. Beams of silver light flashed while the sounds of weapon colliding echoed as the person started an all out attack on Lu Lianrong. It was Madam Yue. She leapt out of the hall, drew her sword, blocked Lu Lianrong's attack, and launched her counter-attack in such a smooth and uninterrupted manner. Her movements were simply beautiful and graceful. Even though she executed every single move in lightening fast speed, everyone was so taken by the beautiful movement that none noticed her swiftness.

"We are all friends here. Why don't we take our time and talk the issue through? There's no need to start a fight," Yue Buqun said as he strolled out of the hall without hurry.

Pulling out the sword by Lao Denuo's waist, Yue Buqun reached out and pushed his sword down after a flip, which held both Lu Lianrong's sword and Madam Yue's sword down under. Lu Lianrong shifted all his strength onto his arm and lifted with a hard jerk, but to his surprise, he couldn't move his sword even an inch. He blushed and then tried several times more, each time with a harder jerk.

“Our Five Mountains Sword Alliance has the same root with different branches. We are all like members of a big family. Apprentice brother Lu, please don’t pay much attention to the junior kids.” Yue Buqun smiled. He turned his head to Linghu Chong. “You are full of nonsense. Apologize to your Uncle-Master Lu right now,” he admonished.

Getting the command from the Master, Linghu Chong had no other choice but to step forward and salute.

“Uncle-Master Lu, I was really blind and didn’t know how to talk properly. I barked madly like a damn crow and slandered the reputation of a supreme Kung Fu master. This is so unworthy, even a dirty swine could have done better. Will your Excellency please don’t feel offended? I wasn’t talking about you. The damn crow barks like mad, but we’ll excuse him as if he was farting!”

He used the words “damn crow” back and forth. Everyone knew that he was ridiculing Lu Lianrong again. Most people were able to hold their laughs inside but Yue Lingshan started giggling loudly.

Yue Buqun could feel that Lu Lianrong tried to jerk upward three times in a row. He let out a slight smile and drew his sword back leisurely to give it back to Lao Denuo. When the tremendous pressure on Lu’s sword suddenly vanished, Lu Lianrong’s arm naturally went upward. Two cracking sounds echoed as two pieces of broken swords fell on the ground. Both Lu Lianrong’s sword and Madam Yue’s sword in their hands had only half of the blade remaining. Lu Lianrong had been using all his strength to fight Yue Buqun’s push. When his arm went up abruptly, the broken sword in his hand also slashed upward and almost cut his own forehead. Fortunately he had great arm strength and was able to stop the movement in time, but the frantic rush still looked quite awkward.

“You…you…two against one!” Lu Lianrong snapped. But he soon remembered that Yue Buqun’s inner energy broke Madam Yue’s long sword just the same. By then Lu Bai, Feng Buping, and the rest bunch had all come out of the hall to watch the fight, and Lu Lianrong knew that each of them could easily tell Yue Buqun was only reconciling and preventing the two from fighting each other without granting favor to either side. However, it was probably no big deal

for a husband to break a wife's long sword. Lu Lianrong, on the other hand, couldn't take it so easily, so he couldn't help but mutter:

"You…you…!"

Stamping his right foot on the floor heavily, he turned around and rushed away in rage with the broken sword still in his hand, never casting a glance back.

At the time when Yue Buqun had broken the two swords with his inner energy, he had already seen the Peach Valley's Six Fairies standing behind Linghu Chong. Very surprised by their unusual looks, he cupped his hands and greeted.

"The six of you have come to Mount Huashan and I haven't greeted you properly. Please pardon my ignorance."

The six Fairies simply stared at him blankly, neither greeting back, nor speaking a word.

"This is my Master, Head Master of the Huashan School – Mr. Yue…." Linghu Chong introduced.

Before he even finished his sentence, Feng Buping interrupted.

"Your Master, he sure is. Whether he is the Head Master of the Huashan School, we'll have to see. Apprentice brother Yue, the 'Divine Art of Violet Twilight' you just displayed is quite impressive. However, knowing this Qi-Gong technique does not make you competent for the authority over the Huashan School. Everyone knows that Huashan School is a sword school member of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. Sword school, sword school! Of course, sword skill is the main driving force. But you keep working with your inner energy skills. You have gone on the evil route. What you are practicing is far from our school's orthodox principle."

"Brother Feng, your comments are really overstating," Yue Buqun defended. "Sure, each school of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance uses sword as the weapon, but no matter which school or which style it is, it all follows the

principle of ‘Energy Drives the Sword.’ Sword skills are external techniques while Qi-Gong techniques are the internal techniques. One must master both the external and the internal to be able to achieve perfection in Kung Fu training. If someone only practices sword techniques like how you just described, then when he meets a Qi-Gong master, he would naturally be pale in comparison.”

Feng Buping sneered. “That’s not necessarily correct. It would be wonderful if someone can be an expert in every field of the three religions and the nine schools of thought,[3] medicine, divination, astrology, fortune-telling, the Four Books and the Five Classics, and the eighteen types of weaponry.[4] It would be fantastic if he could be a master in every single style, let it be either knife art or spear art. But everyone’s life span is limited and it is impossible for one to master everything. When one focuses only on sword art, it is already difficult to be excellent at it, why should he get sidetracked by other Kung Fu skills? I am not saying that practicing Qi-Gong techniques is bad, only that the orthodox Kung Fu of our Huashan School is sword art. It’s totally fine if you want to get into the heterodox Kung Fu. Even if you decide to learn the ‘Magical Art of Essence Absorbing’ of the Demon Cult, it’s your own choice and nobody else’s business, let alone practicing Qi-Gong techniques. When an ordinary person ruins his own training because of greed and avarice, he has himself to blame for his suffering. Now since you are the Head Master of the Huashan School and have also chosen to go on such a destructive route, you are really misleading all the apprentices and exerting a widespread pernicious influence.”

A notion suddenly popped into Linghu Chong’s head. “Grand Uncle-Master Feng only taught me sword techniques. He…he is probably from the Sword-Branch. Is it…is it wrong that I have learned sword techniques from him?” Instantly, the thought sent cold shivers down his spine and he broke out a cold sweat.

“‘Misleading all the apprentices and exerting a widespread pernicious influence?’ That’s not true.” Yue Buqun smiled.

The short man standing next to Feng Buping suddenly cut in loudly. “Why is it not true? You have taught a bunch of damn useless apprentices. If that’s not

‘misleading all the apprentices and exerting a widespread pernicious influence,’ then what is? Apprentice brother Feng said that your Kung Fu is the heterodox and you are not worthy to be the Head Master of the Huashan School. He is absolutely right. Are you going to step down yourself, or wait for someone to drag you down?”

By then, Lu Dayou had finally arrived. Seeing that big apprentice brother stared at the short man with a questioning look, he whispered to Linghu Chong.

“I heard from their earlier conversations with Master that the short guy’s name is Cheng Buyou.”

“Brother Cheng,” Yue Buqun said, “your Sword-Branch left our school twenty-five years ago and stopped calling yourselves apprentices of the Huashan School. Why do you come back and make trouble now? If you think your Kung Fu skills are wonderful, you can simply start your own school. Once you gain great fame in the Martial World and your reputation precedes the Huashan School, I would only have admiration. However, what good does your pointless argument do other than getting us on bad terms with each other?”

“Apprentice brother Yue,” Cheng Buyou said loudly, “I have no grudge against you and really didn’t want to get on bad terms with you. You arrogated the post of Huashan School Head Master, yet you only teach the apprentices inner energy techniques instead of advanced sword techniques. That caused our Huashan School’s reputation to decline greatly. In the end, you can’t just shirk the responsibility and shift the blame onto others. I am an apprentice of the Huashan School, that’s why I can’t just watch by the side with folded arms and pretend to not see it. In addition, when the Qi-Branch pushed the Sword-Branch out, your methods weren’t that clear and aboveboard. None of our Sword-Branch apprentices were convinced of the legitimacy. We have already endured it for twenty-five years. Today is finally the time we can square the accounts.”

“The conflict between the Qi-Branch and the Sword-Branch of our sword school has a long history. On that day when the two branches had the big contest atop the Jade Maiden Peak, the winner was determined; what’s right and what’s wrong was identified. What good does it do for the three of you to bring

the past history out twenty-five years later?" Yue Buqun said.

"Who saw the end result of the sword contest on that day? The three of us are all apprentices of the Sword-Branch, how come none of us saw it? In short, you took the Head Master post in a very unclear and suspicious fashion, otherwise, why would Alliance Chief Zuo, the leader of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, grant us the Command Flag to let you step down?" Cheng Buyou challenged.

"That is really odd!" Yue Buqun shook his head. "Alliance Chief Zuo has good understanding and judgment. Based on the scenario, he would have never granted the Command Flag all of a sudden to let the Huashan School change its Head Master."

"Are you saying the Command Flag is a fake?" Cheng Buyou pointed at the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance.

"The Command Flag is authentic, but the Command Flag doesn't speak," Yue Buqun said.

Lu Bai had been watching quietly by the side all the time. He finally cut in. "Apprentice brother Yue, you said that the Command Flag doesn't speak, but can't I speak either?"

"Even if Alliance Chief Zuo really thought so, his excellency still can't give the order after hearing only one side of the story. He's got to listen to my words as well.
Besides, Alliance Chief Zuo is the chief of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, and his responsibilities include the common issues across the five sword schools. Regarding internal affairs of the Taishan, Heng-Shan, Hengshan, and Huashan Schools, the Head Master of each school has the authority," Yue Buqun concluded.

"You are surely wordy! So after all, you are not going to give up the post of the Head Master. Am I not right?" Cheng Buyou croaked.

By the time he spit out the words "Head Master," he had already drawn his sword. At the word "am," he shot out a thrust; at the word "I," he shot out

another thrust; at the word “not,” he shot out a third thrust; and at the word “right,” he shot out one more thrust. He said the words “am I not right” in one breath, and he shot four thrusts out continuously at the same time.

The four thrusts were executed in supreme speed, and each of the four continuous thrusts used a different fierce technique with brilliant variation. The first thrust penetrated Yue Buqun’s robe on his left shoulder, the second one penetrated his robe on his right shoulder, the third penetrated the sleeve by his left arm, and the fourth penetrated the robe by his right chest. Each of the four thrusts went straight through and all four of them left a total of eight holes on Yue Buqun’s robe. The blade went right next to Yue Buqun’s skin with a mere half-inch distance each time, though none touched his skin at all. The brilliance of the moves, the supreme speed, the precise accuracy, and the fierce force of the thrusts all showed the bearing of a first-class elite fighter.

All Huashan School apprentices turned pale with terror except Linghu Chong, thinking, “These four moves are all moves of our Huashan School style, but we have never seen Master demonstrate them before. The elite fighter from the Sword-Branch surely is extraordinary.”

However, Lu Bai, Feng Buping, and the rest of the visitors felt more admiration toward Yue Buqun. When Cheng Buyou suddenly shot out four thrusts continuously, each thrust was a fierce move and capable of killing Yue Buqun on the spot, yet Yue Buqun still maintained his smile throughout the course and took the four thrusts with complete ease. The confidence he showed was exceptional. Cheng Buyou and his companions came to Mount Huashan with a clear intention to take the Head Master post from him. No matter how kind Yue Buqun was, he couldn’t have not guarded against the possibility that his opponent might launch a sudden attack to harm him, yet he didn’t dodge at all and took the four thrusts without any worries. Obviously he had a plan well thought out, and as soon as Cheng Buyou proceeded to harm him, he would have a way to counter. Within the split of a second, he was actually capable of countering the enemy and protecting himself; his Kung Fu had to be far better than Cheng Buyou’s. Yue Buqun didn’t even move a little finger, but the power

he had just shown was no different than winning the fight.

Linghu Chong recognized the four moves Cheng Buyou had used easily. They really originated from a Huashan School style sword move drawn on the rock wall in the back cave. Cheng Buyou simply transformed it into four different thrusts with slight variations. Although the four thrusts looked completely different from each other, they really all came from one move. He couldn't help but think, "No matter how brilliant Sword-Branch's sword moves are, they still can't exceed the scope of the drawings on the rock wall."

"Brother Cheng, my husband has given ground again and again, considering that you are all guests here. You have made eight holes on his robe already. If you haven't figured out how to behave yourself by now, be aware that even though our Huashan School respects its guests, there still is a limit," Madam Yue warned.

"Giving ground? Guests? What are you talking about? Madam Yue, all you have to do is to defeat my four sword moves. If you can do that, I'll leave the premise with no complaints. And not only that, I'll never set foot on the Jade Maiden Peak again," Cheng Buyou exclaimed.

Cheng Buyou considered himself an excellent swordsman, but seeing the confidence and calmness Yue Buqun just put on display, he dared not to challenge Yue Buqun. He thought, "Even though Madam Yue also has great fame in the Huashan School, she is a woman after all. Didn't she show a frightened look when she saw the four thrusts of mine? If I can goad her into a fight, I am sure I can subdue her. By then, Yue Buqun might surrender for the sake of Madam Yue's safety. Or, at least, he would be greatly worried and get thrown off balance. That would certainly give brother Feng Buping some advantages.

"Madam Yue, please! It is well known that Heroine Ning is a first-class master of the Huashan School Qi-Branch. Cheng Buyou from the Sword-Branch would like to check out Heroine Ning's Qi-Gong techniques," cupping his hands, Cheng Buyou said loudly. By saying so, he had made it very clear that this was going to be a duel between the Sword-Branch and the Qi-Branch of the Huashan School.

Although Madam Yue wasn't sure she could beat those four clever and ingenious sword moves, she simply couldn't stand Cheng Buyou's overbearing attitude. With a loud ring, she unsheathed her sword.

"Master-Wife," Linghu Chong cut in quickly, "Sword-Branch's way of practice has gone astray. How could it ever match the orthodox Kung Fu of our Huashan School? Please allow me, the apprentice, to fight him first. If my Qi-Gong techniques are sloppy and I fail to beat him, then Master-Wife can dismiss him later."

He didn't even wait for Madam Yue's approval and leapt forward immediately, hiding Madam Yue behind his back. In his right hand, he held a broom, which he had picked up randomly by the wall.

"Master Cheng," Linghu Chong pointed the handle of the broom at Cheng Buyou, "you are no longer a member of our school. I guess I won't be calling you an Uncle-Master. If you have already realized your mistakes and want to mend your ways so you can join Huashan School again, I am not too sure whether my Master is still willing to take you back. Even if my Master is willing to make the sacrifice and take you back in, according to school rules – the earlier the more senior status – you will have to call me a senior apprentice brother. Come on, let's play!"

"Nonsense, you filthy swine! If you can survive these four moves of mine, I'll submit myself to you as an apprentice," Cheng Buyou shouted in outrage.

Linghu Chong shook his head. "I am not sure I want an apprentice like you…." Before he even finished the sentence, Cheng Buyou had interrupted him with a shout.

"Draw your sword and get ready to die!"

"Even a branch can be used as a sharp blade once it carries enough inner energy. Brother Cheng, just to counter those couple of your sloppy sword moves, I don't think there's a need to use a real sword," Linghu Chong answered.

"Fine. Don't blame me for being cruel then. Blame it on your own arrogance!"

Yue Buqun and Madam Yue both knew very well that Cheng's Kung Fu skills were far superior to Linghu Chong's. Using a broom against Cheng Buyou's sword would be almost like fighting him with bare hands – way too dangerous. They shouted almost in unison.

"Chong, step back!"

In blazing flashes, Cheng Buyou lunged his thrusts toward Linghu Chong. It was the same move he had attacked Yue Buqun with a minute earlier. He had his reasons for using the exact same move. Firstly, those moves were among his best techniques. Secondly, he did say that he would use the same sword moves. Thirdly, by using the same moves again, he was letting his opponent gain certain advantages by knowing what to expect, thus getting compensated for his own advantage of using a better weapon.

Linghu Chong had already figured out ways to counter Cheng's moves before he challenged Cheng Buyou. In those drawings on the rock wall in the back cave, all figures used unique weapons to counter sword moves. If he chose to use a sword in the fight, he wouldn't have the certainty of success because he had not mastered the techniques in the Dugu Nine Swords. But the shabby broom had the shape of a thunderbolt mace and would be perfect for those moves in the drawings.

Seeing Cheng Buyou's sword thrusting toward him, Linghu Chong brushed the broom toward Cheng Buyou's face. This brushing move was a very risky move indeed. A real thunderbolt mace is made out of steel, and if the brushing move had landed squarely, the opponent would have been either killed or at least severely wounded. If he had a real thunderbolt mace in his hand, the brushing move would be an ingenious move and the opponent would be forced to suspend his thrust and draw his sword back to defend. But what kind of damage would a shabby broom do to the opponent? He only had plain ordinary inner energy strength and was just talking big when he said "Even a branch can be used as a sharp blade once it carries enough inner energy." Even if the brushing move hit Cheng Buyou on the face, the most damage would be no more than a few scratches, nothing major at all, but Cheng Buyou's thrust would

for sure penetrate his chest all the way. Linghu Chong was really betting on the theory that a senior master like Cheng Buyou would never allow the filthy and shabby broom to hit him in the face, because the humiliation would be too great compared to the satisfaction from killing Linghu Chong.

Surely enough, in the gasping sounds from the watching crowd, Cheng Buyou turned his head aside and pulled his sword back to chop at the broom. Linghu Chong moved the shabby broom to the side and dodged the chop.

Having no choice but to pull back his sword and block the broom in his first move, Cheng Buyou couldn't help but blush. He had no idea that Linghu Chong's brush with the shabby broom was actually created by over ten Demon Cult Elders working their hearts out, spending countless of hours with combined efforts just to counter this exact sword move of his. It was really a masterpiece work that had been polished again and again. He figured that Linghu Chong must have come up with such a move accidentally and defeated his move by shear luck. In great rage, he launched his second thrust. This time the thrust didn't follow the original sequence. It was really the fourth thrust he had used to pierce Yue Buqun's robe under Yue's armpit.

Linghu Chong turned his body to the side while handing over the broom to his left hand. It looked as if he was just dodging Cheng's thrust, but the shabby broom in his left hand suddenly shot out in a flash and went straight toward Cheng Buyou's chest. The broom was much longer than the sword, so even though the thrust from the broom was launched later, it reached the target earlier. Before Cheng Buyou had enough time to circle his blade around, the bamboo threads at the end of the broom had jabbed on to his chest.

"Got you!" Linghu Chong shouted.

With a quick slashing sound, Cheng Buyou's blade slashed the end of the broom off. But all the elite fighters in the watching crowd saw clearly that Cheng Buyou had already lost. If Linghu Chong had used a real thunderbolt mace, or a spike-toothed harrow, or a crescent shaped spade, all made out of steel, Cheng Buyou would have been badly injured in the chest.

If Linghu Chong were a first-class senior master, Cheng Buyou would have no choice but to throw down his sword to admit his defeat and give up the fight, but Linghu Chong obviously was just a second-generation apprentice, how embarrassing would it be to lose to him with his shabby broom? With that in mind, Cheng Buyou launched another three thrusts, all of which used superb techniques of the Huashan School. Out of the three moves, it turned out that two of them were among the ones carved on the rock wall in the back cave. Although Linghu Chong had never seen the third move, after learning the "Sword-Breaking Stance" in Dugu Nine Swords, he had a pretty good understanding of how to counter various sword moves out there. He turned his body and dodged one of Cheng's thrusts, then immediately countered with a technique from the rock wall that used a staff to counter sword techniques. Using the broom handle as a staff, he knocked Cheng Buyou's sword to the side with a smack and then thrust his broom handle straight toward Cheng Buyou's sword tip. If he had had an iron staff or iron club in his hand, then because the staff was solid and the sword was flexible, when the two forces collided, the long sword would immediately break into pieces and the sword wielding fighter would have no way out of it. But when he used the technique in a hurry without too much thinking, he completely forgot that he was only holding a bamboo stick. When the bamboo stick met the sharp sword, it was almost like a hot knife cutting through butter, with a loud cracking sound, the long sword stabbed all the way into the bamboo stick leaving only the sword handle visible outside.

Linghu Chong reacted with a very quick mind within a split second. He struck the broom handle from the side with his right hand. The broom handle, together with the sword inside it, flew high in the air toward the side.

Filled with anger and embarrassment, Cheng Buyou flipped his left palm rapidly and with a loud smacking sound, struck Linghu Chong squarely on the chest. Cheng Buyou had decades of experience in Kung Fu, but Linghu Chong was only familiar with techniques in sword moves and was no match for him in a bare handed combat. Falling backwards, Linghu Chong flew in the air and landed on the floor with his back first while blood spurted out from his month.

Suddenly, several shadows flashed forward and in a split of a second, Cheng Buyou was already lifted off ground by his four limbs. A loud scream echoed as blood and internal organs shattered all over the floor – he had been ripped into four pieces. Four extremely ugly freaks each held in their hands one of Cheng Buyou's limbs. The four Peach Valley's Fairies had literally ripped a once alive Cheng Buyou into four pieces.

The sudden event happened so abruptly and unexpectedly that everyone in the crowd was struck dumb by terror. Seeing the horrible sight of blood and flesh mingling together, Yue Lingshan uttered a short shriek and then fainted. Even those very experienced elite fighters in the Martial World like Yue Buqun, Lu Bai, and so on were all seized with panic.

At the time when the four Peach Valley's Fairies ripped Cheng Buyou into pieces, Flower Fairy and Fruit Fairy had already rushed forward simultaneously. Picking Linghu Chong up from the floor, they ran toward the foothill in an amazing speed.

Yue Buqun and Feng Buping both drew their swords and thrust toward Branch Fairy and Leaf Fairy's backs almost at the same instant. Root Fairy and Trunk Fairy each took out a short iron club and blocked the two thrusts in unison. The weapon colliding sounds echoed as the four Peach Valley's Fairies accelerated away with their excellent Qing-Gong skills, never looking back.

Within seconds, the six freaks and Linghu Chong had all disappeared from sight. Lu Bai, Yue Buqun, and Feng Buping could only look at each other in blank dismay. Seeing how the six freaks had taken off in such amazing speed, they all knew too well that it was impossible to keep up with them. Staring at the blood and the four pieces that used to be Cheng Buyou, everyone felt great terror and shame. After a long while, Lu Bai shook his head. Feng Buping shook his head as well.

The palm strike from Cheng Buyou hit Linghu Chong solidly and squarely. Linghu Chong was so severely wounded that shortly after the two Peach Valley's Fairies carried him away, he fell unconscious. By the time he regained his consciousness and opened his eyes slowly, he saw two horsy faces, piled with

concerns and caring, with two pairs of eyes staring directly at his face without blinking.

Seeing that Linghu Chong opened his eyes, Flower Fairy said in joy, “He’s awake! He’s awake! This lad won’t die on us now.”

“Of course he won’t die on us. How could he die just because someone gave him a gentle palm strike?” Fruit Fairy commented.

“Geez, it all sounds so easy from your mouth. If this palm strike had landed on you, of course it would be nothing, but since it landed on this lad, maybe it will kill him,” Flower Fairy snubbed.

“He is obviously not dead. Why are you saying that it will kill him?” Fruit Fairy asked.

“I didn’t say that it definitely would kill him. I said that maybe it will kill him,” Flower Fairy argued.

“Since he turned out to be alive, you can’t say that ‘maybe it will kill him’.” Fruit Fairy disagreed.

“I’ve already said that. So what?” Flower Fairy charged.

“That proves that your foresight was totally wrong, and we can also say that you have no foresight,” Fruit Fairy replied.

“If you had foresight and knew that for sure he wouldn’t die, then why did you moan and groan and pull a long face?” Flower Fairy countered.

“First of all, I moaned and groaned earlier not because I worried that he might die. I was worrying about how worried the little nun would be once she sees him like this. Secondly, since we won the bet with the little nun and agreed to come to Mount Huashan and invite Linghu Chong to go see her, and now we’ve only gotten a half alive half dead Linghu Chong, I am afraid that the little nun wouldn’t concur,” Fruit Fairy explained.

“If you are so sure that he definitely won’t die, you can just go tell the little nun to not worry about it. And since the little nun won’t be worrying about it, why are you so worried?” Flower Fairy challenged.

“First of all, when I tell the little nun to not worry, she won’t necessarily listen to me. Even if she does listen to me and pretends to not worry, she will in fact still worry about it. Secondly, although this lad won’t die, he is indeed wounded pretty badly, and maybe it would be pretty hard to recover, then of course I am slightly worried,” Fruit Fairy answered.

Linghu Chong could hear the arguing back and forth between the two brothers. Their words were ludicrous, but obviously the two of them were both deeply concerned about his well being. He couldn’t help but feel grateful. When he heard the two talking about “the little nun might worry about him,” he figured that “the little nun” must have been little apprentice sister Yilin of the Heng-Shan School. So he said with a smile,

“You two can relax. Linghu Chong won’t die so easily.”

Fruit Fairy was overjoyed. “Did you hear that? He said himself that he won’t die. And you were saying that maybe it will kill him,” he said to Flower Fairy.

“When I said that earlier, he hadn’t opened his mouth and started talking yet,” Flower Fairy argued.

“He opened his eyes, then of course he would open his mouth and start talking next. Anybody can see that. Duh!” Fruit Fairy said.

Linghu Chong thought that if these two kept arguing back and forth, there would never be an end to it, so he interrupted with a smile, “I was going to die, but when I heard that the two of you really didn’t want me to die, I thought to myself, ‘Geez, Peach Valley’s Six Fairies have such immense fame and reputation in the…in the…*cough*…Martial World. When you don’t want me to die, how dare I die on you?”

These words sounded like music in Flower Fairy and Fruit Fairy’s ears. They immediately agreed in unison, “Yes, yes! This guy’s words are so logical! Let’s go tell the other brothers.” The two of them rushed out in a dash.

Linghu Chong found himself lying on a wooden bed. The netting above his head was ragged and aged. Having no idea where he was at this moment, he turned his head slightly, which only resulted in great pains coming from his

chest, so he remained still in the same position. Not long after, Root Fairy and the remaining Fairies all rushed into the room. As soon as they came in, they all started talking nonstop. Some of them started claiming credits for themselves; some appraised Linghu Chong's decision to not die on them; some others started talking about how they rushed into rescuing Linghu Chong and didn't have any time to square the account with that old dog from the Songshan School, otherwise, they would have ripped him into four pieces and see if he could still nip Peach Valley's Six Fairies dead like nipping puny ants after he turned into four pieces. In order to join in and share the happy mood the six Fairies were displaying, Linghu Chong struggled to gather enough strength and carried out a few dialogues, but he soon fell back into a coma.

In the wooziness, Linghu Chong felt nauseated in his chest, and almost felt like that his entire artery system had turned upside down. It was such an unspeakable discomfort. Then after a long while, he gradually regained his consciousness. This time he felt as if his body had been roasted in a huge oven. In great pain, he couldn't help but groan. Then he heard somebody yelling at him.

"Be quiet!"

Linghu Chong opened his eyes. The first thing he saw was a tiny light from the lamp on the table. Then he found himself lying on the floor, almost completely naked. Four Peach Valley Fairies each grabbed hold of one of his four limbs, and the other two Fairies each had a palm on him, one pressed down on his stomach, the other one pressed down on the Bai-Hui Acupoint near his forehead. In great terror, Linghu Chong felt a stream of hot energy flowing upwards starting from the hallow of his left foot, passing by his left leg, lower stomach, chest, right arm, all the way up to the hallow of his right palm. Then another stream of hot energy flew downward starting from the hallow of his left palm, passing by his left arm, chest, abdomen, right leg, all the way down till the hallow of his right foot. The two streams of hot energy twirled and circled as if they were hot steams heating up Linghu Chong. Sweat streamed down all over Linghu Chong's body. He couldn't stand the burning heat a second longer.

Linghu Chong knew the Peach Valley's Six Fairies were trying to heal his wounds using advanced Qi-Gong techniques with superb inner energy. While feeling grateful full heartedly, he tried to gather his own inner energy using the Huashan School style Qi-Gong techniques his Master had taught him, so that it would add to the streams of energy flow, but as soon as a stream of his own inner energy emerged from within his abdomen, an appalling pain suddenly came from his abdomen as if a knife had just cut through his stomach. Linghu Chong growled in pain as blood spurted out from his mouth like a fountain.

"Not good!" Peach Valley's Six Fairies cried out in unison!

Leaf Fairy flipped his palm in a hurry and struck Linghu Chong on the forehead, which knocked Linghu Chong out cold immediately.

Linghu Chong stayed in a coma afterwards, feeling hot for a moment and then cold for the next. The two streams of hot energy kept flowing back and forth around his entire body, and sometimes even more steams of hot energy would emerge and collide with each other, making it even more unbearable for him.

After an unknown amount of time, he finally felt a brief period of coolness in his head and gained some consciousness. He could hear that the Peach Valley's Six Fairies were in the middle of a heated argument. He opened his eyes slowly and saw Trunk Fairy standing next to him.

"See, he stopped sweating, and even opened his eyes. Isn't my method the truly effective one? My stream of energy flows from Zhong-Du Acupoint to Feng-Shi Acupoint and Huan-Tiao Acupoint, and then circling back and forth around his Yuan-Ye Acupoint. I am positive that it will definitely heal his internal injuries," Trunk Fairy claimed.

"Save your breath. If I hadn't used my own method the day before yesterday and sent my stream of energy going back and forth along the many passages around his Foot-To-Liver Jue-Yin Channel[5], the lad would have been dead a long time ago. Would you still have the chance to send your energy stream circling back and forth around his Yuan Ye Acupoint?" Root Fairy rebuffed.

"That's right! But even though big brother's method might heal his internal

injuries, he would still not be able to walk using both of his feet. Wouldn't that be a blemish in an otherwise perfect solution? I think my method is still the best. This lad's internal wounds are really related to passage blockage to his pericardium. We got to use our inner energy to clear the blockage in the three visceral cavities in his Kidney Channel," Branch Fairy concluded.

"What kind of nonsense is that? How would you know that his internal wounds are related to passage blockage to his pericardium? Did you get into his body and checked yourself?" Root Fairy rebuked angrily.

The arguing went on and on among the three brothers.

Leaf Fairy suddenly spoke out. "I don't think it's a good idea to let the energy stream circling back and forth around his Yuan-Ye Acupoint. It would be better to work on his Foot-To-Kidney Shao-Yin Channel first."

Before anyone had a chance to comment, he had already grabbed onto the Yin-Gu Acupoint on Linghu Chong's left knee. A stream of hot energy seeped inside Linghu Chong's body through the acupoint.

Trunk Fairy was infuriated. "Hey! Are you making trouble for me again? Let's each give it a try then, and see who's really right."

After the words, he immediately worked harder on gathering more inner energy and filled them directly into Linghu Chong's body.

Linghu Chong almost vomited and felt like that blood would spurt out of his mouth again any second. He groaned hard inwardly, "This is terrible! This is so terrible! The six of them really have good intentions and want to save my life, but they simply can't agree with each other and each one decides to work on me in his unique way. I must have real lousy luck this time!"

He wanted to speak out and call on the six Fairies to stop right away but he didn't even have the strength to move his tongue.

"He took the palm strike on the chest, which resulted in several internal injuries, then of course it would be logical to start healing from his Hand-To-Lung Tai-Yang Channel. The best solution will be to fill my energy stream into

his Zhong-Fu, Chi-Ze, Kong-Zui, Lie-Que, Tai-Yuan, and Shao-Shang Acupoints." Root Fairy started talking again.

"Big brother," Trunk Fairy said, "I admire you in many different things. But you have to admit that I am much better than you in healing with inner energy. This lad is running a fever all over his body, and that's the symptom of having too much positive energy in his body. We must start from his Hand Tai-Yang Channel. I've decided to open up his Shang-Yang, He-Gu, Shou-San-Li, Qu-Chi, and Ying-Xiang acupoints."

"Wrong! Wrong! Totally wrong!" Branch Fairy said as he shook his head hard.

"What do you know? Why are you saying that I am totally wrong?" Branch Fairy rebuffed angrily.

Root Fairy, on the other hand, became quite happy. He said with a smile, "Third brother is the one who understand medical principles after all. He knows that I got it right, and second brother got it wrong."

"Well, second brother sure got it wrong, but big brother, you didn't get it right, either," Leaf Fairy commented. "Look at him. This lad is showing a blank stare. His lips are trembling, yet he just doesn't want to talk…."

(Linghu Chong scolded inwardly, "Who said that I don't want to talk? After you guys sent your energy streams into a wild goose chase inside my body, how could I still have any strength left to talk?")

Leaf Fairy continued, "…then of course his mind isn't working right and he is turning into a retard. We must work on his Yang-Ming Stomach Channel."

(Linghu Chong scolded inwardly again, "Your mind isn't working right! You are the real retard here!")

Right after Leaf Fairy's words, Linghu Chong felt pain coming from his Si-Bai Acupoint right below the eye sockets, and then sourness came from his Di-Cang Acupoint by the corner of his mouth. Immediately after, severe pain came from the Da-Ying Acupoint, Jia-Che Acupoint on his face and many other acupoints

like Tou-Wei Acupoint and Xia-Guang Acupoint on top of his head. And in the next moment, great sourness and itchiness followed. His facial muscles ended up going into spasms.

"You've worked on him for so long, yet he still can't talk," Fruit Fairy spoke. "I think his brain is just fine. Maybe his tongue is real stiff. That would be the symptom of a bad cold. Let me heal him with my inner energy by working on his Yin-Bai, Tai-Bai, Gong-Sun, Shang-Qiu, Di-Ji, and those types of acupoints. But…but…if it doesn't work, you'd better not blame me for it."

"If your method doesn't work, you'd get him killed for sure, then how could he not blame you for it?" Trunk Fairy replied.

"But if you already know that his tongue is getting stiff, and still not work on his Foot-To-Spleen Tai-Yin Channel, are you just going to watch him die?" Fruit Fairy argued.

"But if your method is wrong, it's gonna be pretty bad!" Branch Fairy suggested.

"Wrong method would be pretty bad, but not able to heal him is just as bad," Flower Fairy cut in. "We've already worked on him for so long and he is still not getting any better. I am pretty sure he is having heart problems. We've got to work on his Hand-To-Heart Shao-Yang Channel first. It is obvious that the key lies in Shao-Hai, Tong-Li, Shen-Men, and Shao-Chong, those four acupoints."

"Didn't you say that we should work on his Foot-To-Kidney Shao-Yin Channel yesterday? How come you are talking about Hand-To-Heart Shao-Yang Channel today? Shao-Yang is all about gathering positive energy, and Shao-Yin is all about generating negative energy. Yin and Yang are totally opposite of each other; have you made up your mind about which one is the right one?" Fruit Fairy challenged.

"Well, positive energy, Yang, only exists because negative energy, Yin, exists. They are the two sides of the same thing, representing that one divides into two. Tai Chi[6] generates two bearings, and the two bearings merge again to make Tai Chi. Therefore, sometimes one divides into two and sometimes two merge to

make one. Shao-Yang and Shao-Yin are both part of the pair. It's not wise to just lump everything together."

Linghu Chong couldn't help but groan inwardly, "You might think it's fine to make up lame excuses and nonsense, but how about my life? It's no trifling matter!"

"We've tried this and that, but none seems to work. I've made up my mind. The only solution is to act willfully," Root Fairy announced.

"How are you going to act willfully?" Trunk Fairy, Branch Fairy, and the rest of the Fairies asked in unison.

"This is apparently a very unique illness. Since it is a unique illness, we'll have to start from unique acupuncture acupoints that are outside of the various channels. I am going to seal his Yin-Tang, Jin-Lv, Yu-Ye, Yu-Yao, Bai-Lao, and Twelve-Jing Acupoints using distance acupoint-sealing technique," Root Fairy explained.

"Big brother, don't do that. It's too risky," the five Fairies shouted all together.

"Why not? If I don't do it now, this lad would be dead in no time," Root Fairy shouted loudly.

Linghu Chong felt as if numerous blades had cut through his Yin-Tang, Jin-Lv, and the rest of the acupoints, one after another with unbearable pain. Soon the pain became so severe that he couldn't even tell from which acupuncture point the pain came from. He tried to howl with his mouth wide open, yet not a single sound came out. Right at that moment, a stream of hot energy forced its way into his acupoints in the Foot-To-Spleen Tai-Yin Channel and started to flow inside him like a wild tide. Soon, another stream of hot energy emerged through the acupoints in the Hand-To-Heart Shao-Yang Channel. The two streams of energy clashed and splattered each other wildly. Not long after, three more streams of hot energy forced their way in from different acupoints in different channels.

Linghu Chong's heart was filled with anger and frustration, and his body, in the meantime, experienced unprecedented and unbearable pain and suffering. In

the last couple of days when Peach Valley's Six Fairies meddled with healing him on a wild goose chase, he had been in a coma and had no idea about it. But at the current moment, he was conscious, yet had no means to stop the Peach Valley's Six Fairies from running wild. He could feel the six streams of hot energy forcing their way through his body at random, and his liver, gallbladder, kidney, lung, heart, spleen, stomach, intestine, bladder, pericardium, the three visceral cavities, and all other vital organs had become playgrounds and battlefield for the six brothers' energy streams. Linghu Chong was furious. He yelled out loud inwardly,

"If I am lucky enough to survive this time, I'll chop you six pigs into ten thousand pieces."

Deep inside his heart, he knew that Peach Valley's Six Fairies all had good intents, and trying to heal him using inner energy would exhaust a good amount of their own inner energy. They would only have done this to friends with exceptional relationship. But at the very moment, he felt almost as if he was boiled, fried, and roasted alive. The suffering was so severe and so unbearable that if he had been able to speak, he would have spilled out the most venomous curses possible in human language.

Even while each of the six Fairies worked on healing Linghu Chong's internal wound using his own method, they never stopped arguing against each other. They had no idea that they had really made a huge mess with the passages and channels in Linghu Chong's body and made it a lot worse. Linghu Chong had been practicing Huashan School's high-grade Qi-Gong techniques since he was young. Even though his achievement of inner energy wasn't at a high level, because it was a kind of orthodox inner energy practice, he had a very solid foundation. And fortunately because of the solid foundation, he was able to linger on in a steadily worsening condition and didn't simply give it all up at the very beginning through the many days of healing, or should it be called torturing, from the six Fairies' meddling around.

Peach Valley's Six Fairies worked with their energy streams for a long while, but they could all tell that Linghu Chong's heart beat had become weaker and

weaker and his breathing took longer and longer. It seemed that he could stop breathing and pass away any second now. They couldn't help but feel worried.

"I don't want to do this anymore. If I keep going and get him killed, he's gonna turn into a ghost in limbo that will keep haunting me and scaring the hell out of me!" Fruit Fairy announced as he pulled his palm away from Linghu Chong's acupoint.

Root Fairy yelled angrily, "If this lad kicks the bucket, he'll definitely blame you first. And once he turned into a ghost stuck in limbo, he'll always haunt you and only you."

In terror, Fruit Fairy let out a scream and jumped out of the window.

Trunk Fairy, Branch Fairy, and the rest Fairies pulled their hands back one after another. Some knitted their eyebrows together and wrinkled their noses while others shook their heads back and forth – none had any idea of what to do next.

"Looks like this lad is not going to make it. What do we do?" Leaf Fairy asked.

"Why don't you guys go tell the little nun that he couldn't stand the palm strike from that short dude and decided to die? We have ripped that short dude into four pieces and avenged his death already," Trunk Fairy suggested.

"Should we tell her about how we tried to heal him with our energy streams?" Root Fairy asked.

"No, no, no, no. Never. You can't mention that!" Trunk Fairy replied in a hurry.

"But what if the little nun then asks why we didn't try to heal him? What then?" Root Fairy asked again.

"Then we'll have to say that we tried to heal him but couldn't heal him," Trunk Fairy answered.

"Then wouldn't the little nun blame us and call Peach Valley's Six Fairies six good for nothing and useless skunks?" Root Fairy rebuffed.

“What? The little nun called us six skunks? How rude!” Trunk Fairy yelled out in rage.

“The little nun didn’t say that. I did.” Root Fairy corrected him.

“Then how would you know that she’d call us that?” Trunk Fairy rebuked angrily.

“Maybe she will!” Root Fairy said.

“And maybe she won’t. What kind of rubbish is that?” Trunk Fairy wasn’t too happy.

“Once this lad is dead, the little nun is going to get so mad. More likely than not she will call us something like that,” Root Fairy insisted.

“I bet that the little nun will break into a loud and bitter cry, but she won’t call us bad names,” Trunk Fairy predicted.

“I’d rather have her call us six skunks than watching her cry out loud,” Root Fairy disputed.

“She may not call us six skunks but something else.” Trunk Fairy argued.

“Then what else?” Root Fairy asked.

“Do we six brothers look like skunks? I don’t think it’s even close. She might as well call us six pussy cats,” Trunk Fairy explained.

“Why? Do we look like pussy cats?” Leaf Fairy cut in.

“When you call people names, they don’t have to look like it,” Flower Fairy joined the battle. “We six brothers are six guys. If the little nun called us six guys, was she calling us bad names?”

“But if she called us six stupid guys or bad guys, then she would be calling us bad names,” Branch Fairy dismissed the theory.

“That still sounds better than six skunks,” Flower Fairy disagreed.

“What if the six skunks are smart skunks, competent skunks, brave skunks, heroic skunks, and the Six Great Skunks in the Martial World? Would six guys

sound better or would six skunks sound better?" Branch Fairy questioned.

Lying in bed and in his last gasp, Linghu Chong couldn't help but feel greatly amused at the endless debate. Somehow, a stream of energy traveled upward and provided him a burst of brief strength to actually speak out,

"Even six skunks are much better than you guys!"

The five Fairies were all astounded. Before any of them had a chance to think the words through Fruit Fairy had already asked from outside of the window.

"Why would six skunks be better than us?"

"Right, why would six skunks be better than us?" the five Fairies inside asked in unison.

Linghu Chong really wanted to spill out endless abuses and curses wholeheartedly, but he simply did not have any strength left to do it.

"You…you'd better send me…send me back to Mount Huashan. Only…only my Master can save…save my life…," he squeezed the words out disjointedly.

"What? Only your Master can save your life? Are you saying that Peach Valley's Six Fairies are incapable of saving your life?" Root Fairy asked in disbelief.

Linghu Chong struggled to signal a nod, and that used up the last bit of strength in his body. He opened his mouth but could no longer make any sound.

"That is just outrageous! What's so special about your Master? How can he possibly be any better than us, Peach Valley's Six Fairies?" Leaf Fairy mocked angrily.

"Humph! Ask his Master to have a fight with us!" Flower Fairy followed.

"We'll grab onto his two arms and two legs. Wham! We rip him into four pieces." Trunk Fairy added.

Fruit Fairy jumped back in through the window. "Even all the boys and girls on Mount Huashan. We'll rip each of them into four pieces, one after another," he suggested.

“Even all the dogs and cats and pigs and goats and chicken and ducks and tortoises and fish and shrimps. We’ll grab onto their four limbs and rip them all into four pieces,” Flower Fairy added.

“Do fish and shrimps have limbs? How are you going to grab onto their four limbs?” Branch Fairy questioned.

“Err…just grab onto the head and the tail and then the top fin and the bottom fin,” Flower Fairy answered after a brief pause.

“But fish head is not a limb of the fish,” Branch Fairy pressed on.

“So it’s not a limb. It doesn’t matter,” Flower Fairy replied.

“Of course it matters a great deal. Since it’s not a limb, that means your first sentence is completely wrong,” Branch Fairy concluded.

Flower Fairy knew very well that Branch Fairy had gotten a handle here, but he still tried to defend himself by sophistry. “What do you mean by my first sentence is completely wrong?”

“You said, ‘Even all the dogs and cats and pigs and goats and chicken and ducks and tortoises and fish and shrimps. We’ll grab onto their four limbs and rip them all into four pieces.’ Didn’t you say that?” Branch Fairy said.

“Sure, I said that. But that sentence isn’t the first sentence I said. I’ve already spoken hundreds and thousands of sentences, why did you say that this was my first sentence? If we start counting from the day I was born, I could have already spoken many millions of sentences. That certainly wasn’t the first sentence I spoke,” Flower Fairy argued.

Branch Fairy was stumped by the answer and found himself completely tongue-tied, having no clue about how to argue that.

“Did you say tortoises?” Trunk Fairy asked.

“That’s right. A tortoise has front legs and back legs, so of course it has four limbs,” Flower Fairy said.

“But when we grab onto the tortoise’s front legs and back legs and pull in four

directions, how are we going to rip it into four pieces?" Trunk Fairy questioned.

"Why can't we? What kind of Kung Fu does a tortoise have that can counter our four brothers' mighty rip?" Flower Fairy didn't get it.

"It's very easy to rip the tortoise's body into four pieces. But what about it's hard shell? How can you rip the shell into four pieces by pulling the tortoise's four legs? If you are not going to rip the hard shell into pieces, then we'll end up with five pieces, not four," Trunk Fairy explained.

"Tortoise shells don't go by piece. You can't say a piece of shell, can you? You just said five pieces and that's wrong," Flower Fairy argued.

"There are a total of thirteen blocks on a tortoise shell. So four is wrong and five is also wrong," Branch Fairy clarified.

"I said rip into five pieces. I didn't say there are five blocks on a tortoise shell. You are obviously confused," Branch Fairy snubbed.

Root Fairy picked it up this time. "You are only ripping the body of the tortoise into four pieces and leaving the tortoise's hard shell alone. So you can only say 'Rip it into four pieces plus a hard shell that can't be ripped apart.' That's why what you just said, 'Rip it into five pieces,' is faulty wording. And it's not only faulty wording, but also completely wrong."

"Big brother, you just said it wrong! Faulty wording is not completely wrong, and completely wrong can't be faulty wording. These two are totally different. How can you mix them all up and confuse one with the other?" Leaf Fairy commented.

Hearing those six rattling on and on, Linghu Chong would have burst into loud laughter if he weren't on the verge between life and death. Those guys' words and acts were extremely funny and laughable, yet he only became more and more annoyed. Then he thought better of it.

"What are the odds of bumping into six such unique and matchless freaks? Such a chance has got to be hard to come by. This must be a trick from the Mighty Creator, maybe one of his rare jokes. To have the chance to be present

personally on such a grand occasion is really something. I guess my life has its worth already. I really should make a toast for that."

At that thought, his unrestrained spirit took over. "Give me…give me some wine!" he shouted.

Hearing these words, Peach Valley's Six Fairies immediately found themselves in much merrier spirits. "Excellent! Excellent! He wants to drink wine, then he's not gonna die," they all said.

"Doesn't matter if…if I am gonna die…die or not. I've got to…got to drink my fill first," Linghu Chong muttered in between groans.

"Sure, sure! I'll go get some wine," Branch Fairy replied, and soon he brought back a big kettle of wine.

Linghu Chong's spirit immediately shot up when he smelled the wonderful scent of wine. "Feed me," he requested.

Branch Fairy plugged the kettle spout into Linghu Chong's mouth and slowly poured the wine into it. A moment later, Linghu Chong finished the entire kettle of wine to the last drop, and his mind also started to work better.

"My Master…always said that among all…all the great heroes…in the world, the toughest had to be Peach…Peach…Peach…."

"Among all the great heroes in the world, the toughest had to be the Peach what?" Peach Valley's Six Fairies asked in unison, all feeling totally anxious as if someone was tickling their hearts with a feather.

"Had to be…to be Peach…Peach…Peach…."

"Peach Valley's Six Fairies!" the six Fairies said in unison.

"That's right," Linghu Chong confirmed. "My Master also said that he really wished to have the chance of drinking together with Peach Valley's Six Fairies and make friends with them, then he would ask those six…six great…great…."

"Six great heroes!" Peach Valley's Six Fairies said in unison.

"Yeah," Linghu Chong confirmed again. "Then he would ask those six great

heroes to give all the apprentices a demonstration and perform…perform their unique and superb Kung Fu skills….”

Peach Valley’s Six Fairies all started talking immediately afterwards.

“Then what next?”

“How does your Master know that we have superb Kung Fu skills?”

“The Head Master of the Huashan School is really a very nice guy! We’ve got to make sure that we don’t even break a branch on Mount Huashan.”

“That’s of course! We won’t even let anyone else break a branch on Mount Huashan.”

“We’ll be very glad to make friends with your Master. Let’s go up Mount Huashan right now!”

Linghu Chong quickly picked up the line. “Right! Let’s go up Mount Huashan right now!”

Wasting no time, Peach Valley’s Six Fairies carried Linghu Chong and immediately headed toward Mount Huashan. After walking for quite a while, Root Fairy suddenly cried out.

“Wait a minute! The little nun wanted us to bring the lad to see her. Why are we taking him to Mount Huashan? If we don’t bring the lad to see the little nun, wouldn’t we have just…just…ah…won another bet? Two wins in a row! That will be quite embarrassing.”

“Big brother said it right this time. Let’s first bring him to see the little nun. We will go up Mount Huashan afterwards so we won’t be winning it one more time,” Trunk Fairy agreed.

The six of them turned around and started heading south.

“Does the little nun want to see a living person or a dead one?” Linghu Chong asked, feeling very worried.

“Of course she wants to see a living lad, not a dead lad,” Root Fairy answered.

“If you don’t send me up Mount Huashan, I will shut down my arteries

immediately and never come back to life again," Linghu Chong threatened.

"That's great! It must be a very advanced technique to be able to shut down your arteries. Please tell us the details," Fruit Fairy said happily.

"As soon as you master this technique, you drop dead instantly. What good does it do to learn that technique?" Trunk Fairy rebuffed.

"It is still useful. If you were forced…forced by others to do things and your life have become a living hell, and all there left are unbearable worries, then it makes perfect sense to shut down your own arteries," Linghu Chong claimed while panting hard.

Peach Valley's Six Fairies' faces fell at those words. "The little nun just wants to see you. She has no ill intention. We aren't forcing you either."

"I know the six of you have very good intents," Linghu Chong said with a sigh, "but if I can't tell my Master and get his permission first, I won't comply even if that means I'll have to give up my life. Besides, my Master and Master-Wife had long wished to meet the six…six…legendary…great… great… great…."

"Great heroes!" Peach Valley's Six Fairies said in unison.

Linghu Chong nodded his confirmation.

"Fine! We'll send you back to Mount Huashan then," Root Fairy finally agreed.

Several hours later, the group of seven was back on Mount Huashan once again.

As soon as the apprentices of Huashan School spotted the group of seven, they dashed back and reported it to Yue Buqun. Hearing that the six freaks that kidnapped Linghu Chong had just returned, the Yue couple immediately greeted out with a bunch of apprentices, feeling completely astounded.

Peach Valley's Six Fairies all traveled at great speed, so as soon as the Yue Couple stepped out of the "House of Integrity" they could already see the six freaks walking toward them along the stone slab road. Two of the six freaks

carried a stretcher with Linghu Chong lying still on it.

Madam Yue rushed forward hurriedly to check on Linghu Chong. What immediately caught her eyes were his two sunken cheeks and a sallow face. She reached out to check his pulse, but what she found only confirmed the worst. Linghu Chong's pulse was so weak and out of order. He was barely alive.

"Chong, Chong!" Madam Yue cried in shock.

"Master…Master…Master-Wife!" Linghu Chong murmured after he slowly opened his eyes.

"Chong, I'll seek revenge for you!" Tear filled Madam's eyes as she drew her sword, ready to stab Flower Fairy, who was one of the two carrying the stretcher.

"Wait!" Yue Buqun shouted. He cupped his hands and saluted the Peach Valley's Six Fairies. "Please pardon me for having not greeted the six of you with proper manners. Will you bestow me the honor by informing me your names and which school you're from?"

Hearing those words, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies were stunned with a mixed feeling of anger and disappointment. When they heard Linghu Chong's words, they had thought that Yue Buqun had truly admired them, the six brothers. Who would have expected that the first sentence out of Yue Buqun's mouth was actually asking for their names? Obviously Yue knew absolutely nothing about the Peach Valley's Six Fairies.

"We heard that you truly admired us six brothers. Could that be a false statement? But how can you be so ignorant of us? What a shame!" Root Fairy said.

"Didn't you say that among all the great heroes the toughest had to be Peach Valley's Six Fairies? Aha, I got it! The name Peach Valley's Six Fairies must have long resounded in your ears, but you simply have no clue that we are the Peach Valley's Six Fairies. Guess we can't blame you," Trunk Fairies followed.

"Second brother, he said that he really wished to have a drink with Peach

Valley's Six Fairies and make friends with them, but once the six of us really showed up on Mount Huashan, he looked neither wildly happy nor willing to get us some wine. So it turned out that he does know the Six Fairies' great fame but doesn't know the Six Fairies' faces. Ha-ha! That is so hilarious," Branch Fairy picked up the line.

Yue Buqun was completely baffled by those words. Not able to make any sense out of them, he simply replied coldly, "You call yourselves the Peach Valley's Six Fairies. I am only an ordinary person. How dare I make friends with six Fairies?"

Peach Valley's Six Fairies instantly felt great joy.

"That would be no problem! We are friends of your apprentice, so we might as well make friends with you," Branch Fairy declared.

"Even though your Kung Fu skills are too ordinary, we won't be looking down upon you. You don't have to worry," Fruit Fairy comforted him.

"If you have any questions in your Kung Fu study, you can feel free to ask us. Of course we'll give you some pointers," Flower Fairy promised.

"Oh, many thanks for that!" Yue Buqun said with a slight smile.

"You don't need to thank us. Now that we, Peach Valley's Six Fairies, consider you a friend, then of course we'll say everything we know with no reserve," Trunk Fairy replied.

"Why don't I demonstrate some cool techniques to everyone of the Huashan School and widen your horizons?" Fruit Fairy suggested.

Madam Yue had no idea that the six brothers were really a bunch of childish and artless guys who lacked common senses. What they said were actually meant for showing their sincere kindness. But these words sounded so offensive and insulting in Madam Yue's ears. She could no longer hold her anger. Raising her arm evenly with her shoulder, she pointed the sword tip right at Fruit Fairy's Solar Plexus.

"Great! Let me get my lesson first and check out your special Kung Fu in

weaponry," Madam Yue rebuked.

"The Peach Valley's Six Fairies rarely use weapons when we spar with people. Didn't you say that you truly admired our Kung Fu skills? How come you didn't know that part?" Fruit Fairy said with a grin.

In Madam Yue's ears, Fruit Fairy's words sounded even more insulting. "I didn't know that part!" she yelled as she suddenly made a lunge with her long sword. The thrust was so rapid and sudden, carrying a tremendous force with it.

Fruit Fairy had already thought of Madam Yue as a friend and never expected her to start such a fierce attack all of a sudden. Within a split of a second, the sword tip had already reached his chest. If he had wanted to defend himself, he would still have had enough time to do so with his superb Kung Fu skills, but since he was such a cowardly type, he was simply struck dumb and completely forgot to dodge, only watching in terror as the sword penetrated his body.

Branch Fairy leapt forward hurriedly and struck Madam Yue in the shoulder with his palm. Madam Yue let go of her sword and stumbled a couple of steps back, leaving the long sword stabbed into Fairy's chest, wobbling up and down.

Root Fairy and the rest Fairies all gasped in terror. Branch Fairy picked up Fruit Fairy and leapt back in a hurry while the rest four Fairies rushed forward and lifted Madam Yue by her four limbs in incredible speed. Yue Buqun knew too well what was going to happen next – the four freaks would tear at the same time and rip Madam Yue's body into four pieces. Even though he was pretty good at staying calm, his wrist still trembled as he sent out two thrusts toward Root Fairy and Leaf Fairy separately with his long sword.

Lying on the stretcher, Linghu Chong could still see the dangerous state his Master-Wife was in. In great despair, he struggled up and shouted.

"Don't hurt my Master-Wife! Or I will shut down all my arteries!"

Before his voice even faded, blood had squired out from his mouth. Linghu Chong fell back down unconscious.

"That lad is gonna shut down his arteries. We can't let that happen! Let go of

the bitch!" Root Fairy yelled out as he dodged the thrust from Yue Buqun.

The four Fairies dropped Madam Yue on the ground. Greatly worried about Fruit Fairy's fatal injury, they ran after Branch Fairy and Fruit Fairy quickly.

Yue Buqun and Yue Lingshan rushed over to Madam Yue's side at the same time. Before they even had a chance to reach out and prop Madam Yue up, she had already leapt back onto her own feet. Feeling a mixture of extreme terror and rage, she couldn't help but tremble. Her face looked completely pale and sallow.

"Junior apprentice sister, don't be angry. We'll seek our revenge for sure. Those six guys are very tough enemies. Fortunately you have already killed one of them," Yue Buqun whispered.

Madam Yue's heart hammered even more as she remembered the scene several days earlier when Cheng Buyou was ripped apart alive. "I…I…I…," she murmured yet could no longer speak normally because her entire body was still shaking hard.

"Lingshan, why don't you take your mother back in to have a rest," Yue Buqun said to his daughter, knowing that his wife had been completely horrified.

Yue Buqun walked by Linghu Chong to check on him. There was blood all over Linghu Chong's face and chest. His breathing was so weak that it almost seemed there was more air breathed out of him than what was breathed in – he was not going to make it. Yue Buqun placed his palm on top of Linghu Chong's Ling-Tai Acupoint on the back in an attempt to use his own high-level inner energy to keep Linghu Chong alive, but as soon as he tried to fill his inner energy in through the acupoint, several streams of weird inner energy inside Linghu Chong's body immediately countered it with a big shock and almost shook his palm off. Completely astounded, he soon discovered that those lunatic energy streams were clashing against each other nonstop inside Linghu Chong's body as well. He put his palm next to Tan-Zhong Acupoint on Linghu Chong's chest, and sure enough, a strong shock struck his palm so hard that

even his own chest started hurting with a dull pain. Yue Buqun was astonished even more this time. He could tell that those energy streams inside Linghu Chong's body flew in odd ways. Apparently they came from some type of advanced yet unorthodox Qi-Gong techniques. Even though each energy stream by itself was slightly weaker than his "Divine Art of Violet Twilight," as soon as two of them attack in the same direction or at the time, he could no longer hold them off on his own. After some more careful detection, he counted a total of six energy streams inside Linghu Chong, and each of them was weird and bizarre. Afraid to continue, Yue Buqun pulled his palm back and pondered.

"There are a total of six energy streams, then of course it had to be those six freaks who filled those into Chong's body. The six freaks are so vicious. They must have tortured Chong so badly by filling their own inner energy into six different channels inside Chong's body, so Chong would suffer constantly, and wouldn't even have the option to end his own misery by committing suicide."

Yue Buqun knitted his brows heavily and shook his head. After telling Gao Gengming and Lu Dayou to carry Linghu Chong inside he went to check on his wife.

Madam Yue was still in shock. While sitting on the bedside holding her daughter's hands, she looked terrified, her face as white as a sheet. As soon as she saw Yue Buqun, she asked,

"How's Chong doing? How serious is his injury?"

Yue Buqun explained how the six energy streams clashed and fought each other inside Linghu Chong's body.

"We've got to dissolve those six heterodox energy streams one by one. Do you think there's still time?" Madam Yue asked.

Yue Buqun raised his head and pondered. After a long while, he finally spoke again.

"Junior apprentice sister, what's your opinion on why the six freaks tortured Chong so badly?

“I guess they wanted Chong to give in and surrender. Or maybe they were trying to force out some kind of secret of our school from him. Chong of course would rather die than submit. That’s why the six ugly freaks tortured him,” Madam Yue suggested.

“That would be a logical explanation in ordinary situations,” Yue Buqun nodded. “But our school doesn’t have any secret. Those six freaks don’t know us at all and have no grudges against us. Why would they send him back after successfully kidnapping him in the first place?”

“I am afraid…Nah, it couldn’t be.” Madam Yue thought of an idea but immediately dismissed it because it did not really make a lot of sense.

The couple stared at each other in silence, each pondering hard with knitted brows.

“Although our school doesn’t have any secret, Huashan style Kung Fu has a great reputation. Maybe those six freaks kidnapped big apprentice brother so they could force him to tell the key elements of our school’s Qi-Gong techniques and sword art techniques.” Yue Lingshan couldn’t help but cut in.

“I’ve thought about this,” Yue Buqun said, “but Chong’s inner energy isn’t that advanced. Those six freaks have very advanced inner energy themselves, so they could easily tell. And regarding sword skills, the six freaks’ Kung Fu style is far from Huashan style sword art. They don’t have anything in common. It makes no sense for them to go through so much trouble just for that. Besides, if they did want to compel Chong into telling them about sword techniques, they should have gone to somewhere far from Mount Huashan so they could torture and force Chong with no rush. Why did they bring him back here?”

From Yue Buqun’s tone of voice, Madam Yue could tell that he was getting more and more affirmative. Having been his wife for so many years, she knew that her husband had already solved the mystery. So she asked, “Then what’s really the reason behind?”

“Use Chong’s internal injury to exhaust my inner energy,” Yue Buqun said slowly, his face looking solemn and serious.

Madam Yue jumped onto her feet. “That’s right! In order to save Chong’s life, you’ve got to use your own inner energy to dissolve those six energy streams. By the time you are about to succeed, if those six ugly freaks suddenly came, while you would be totally exhausted, they would be at their ease, then they could easily kill all of us.”

She paused for a brief moment and then continued. “Fortunately there are only five freaks left. Senior apprentice brother, they had already taken me a prisoner earlier. Why did they let me go after Chong shouted at them?” She felt the terror again as she remembered the horrible incident she had just experienced moments earlier. Her voice trembled again.

“That’s exactly the cause for my conclusion.” Yue Buqun explained. “You killed one of them. They must have had extraordinary hatred for us. But they immediately set you free only because they were afraid that Chong would shut down his own arteries and commit suicide. Think about it. If they didn’t have a big conspiracy, why would they value Chong’s life so much?”

“Their wickedness and ruthlessness are to the extreme!” Madam Yue murmured as she thought to herself, “When the four freaks ripped Cheng Buyou into pieces, they showed tremendous cruelty. Such level of cruelty is rarely seen in the entire Martial World. In the last several days, my heart has been hammering every time I thought about it. Their interruption did put a pause on Feng Buping’s plan to take over the Head Master post. Feng Buping ended up leaving disappointed with Lu Bai and the bunch. Those six freaks definitely took care of the problem for the Huashan School temporarily. Who would have thought that they would come back to Mount Huashan to cause more trouble? It must have been just like what senior apprentice brother has figured out.”

At that thought, Madam Yue said, “You can’t work on Chong with your inner energy. My inner energy mastery is far less than yours, but let’s hope it’s good enough to keep him alive temporarily.” She started to head toward the door.

“Junior apprentice sister!” Yue Buqun called out.

Madam Yue paused and turned her head back.

“It’s no use. Those six freaks’ heterodox energy streams are very powerful.” Yue Buqun shook his head.

“So only your ‘Divine Art of Violet Twilight’ is capable of dissolving them, isn’t it? What should we do then?” Madam Yue asked.

“Right now we can only take one step at a time and see where it will lead us. Let’s first keep him breathing. That doesn’t require much of my inner energy anyway,” Yue Buqun suggested.

The three went into the room Linghu Chong was placed in. Madam Yue’s tears started rolling again as soon as she saw Linghu Chong lying there motionless, hardly breathing at all. She reached out to check on Linghu Chong’s pulse, but Yue Buqun caught her hand with his own. He let her hand go after shaking his head slightly. Pressing both hands onto Linghu Chong’s palms, Yue Buqun slowly passed his inner energy over. As soon as his inner energy clashed with the energy streams inside Linghu Chong, Yue Buqun’s body shook abruptly and he took a step back, his face turning violet.

Linghu Chong suddenly started talking. “Where…where is apprentice brother Lin?”

“Why do you need Little Lin?” Yue Lingshan asked in surprise.

“Before his father…passed away, he wanted me to take a message…to apprentice brother Lin. I haven’t had a chance to tell him…. I am not going to make it this time. Find…find him, hurry.” Linghu Chong murmured, his eyes still shut tight.

Tear started rolling in Yue Lingshan’s eyes. She covered her face and ran out of the room. All the Huashan School apprentices had been waiting outside. Getting the message from Yue Lingshan, Lin Pingzhi went inside right away and walked by Linghu Chong’s bed.

“Big apprentice brother, you need to take care!” Lin Pingzhi said.

“Is…is this apprentice brother Lin?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Yes, it’s me,” Lin Pingzhi answered.

“Right…right before your father…passed away, I was by…by his side. He wanted me to…to tell…you…” Linghu Chong’s voice became weaker and weaker as if he had ran out of breath. Everyone held his or her breaths. The room was swept with dead silence.

After quite a while Linghu Chong finally caught his breath. He continued, “He said that you should take good care of the thing in the old Lin House at the Xiang-Yang Alley in Fuzhou. But…but you shall never read…read it, or…or great misfortune will fall upon you…!”

“The old Lin House at the Xiang-Yang Alley? That has been left vacant for a good while. There is nothing of importance there. What is this thing that my father told me to not read?” Lin Pingzhi asked in surprise.

“I don’t know. Those are all the words…all the words…your parents wanted me to tell you. They didn’t say anything else…before they…passed…passed away….” Linghu Chong’s voice went weaker again.

The four of them waited a few more moments, but Linghu Chong remained silent. Yue Buqun heaved a sigh and then said to Lin Pingzhi and Yue Lingshan,

“Wait here by your big apprentice brother’s side. If his injury has any change, come and tell me right away.”

Lin and Yue both nodded.

The Yue couple went back to their own room, both feeling very depressed. Only moments later, tears slowly streamed down Madam Yue’s cheeks once again.

“Don’t be upset. We’ll definitely avenge Chong,” Yue Buqun assured her.

“Since those six freaks plotted this venomous scheme, they will come back again for sure. If we fight them recklessly, we might not necessarily lose, but if anything goes wrong….” Madam Yue said.

“‘We might not necessarily lose?’ That’s far easier said than done. If we fight three of them together, we would end up a draw at most. If we fight four of them together, then most likely we will lose. If the five of them all jump onto us

simultaneously….” Yue Buqun shook his head slowly.

Madam Yue knew herself that the two of them would be no match for the five freaks in a fight, but she had hoped that since her husband’s Kung Fu had greatly improved in the last several years after he successfully mastered the “Divine Art of Violet Twilight,” there might still be a small chance of winning. When she heard Yue Buqun’s words, she became greatly worried.

“Then…then what do we do? Are we going to just fold our arms and await destruction?”

“Don’t get dispirited. A true man can handle both good times and bad times. Winning or losing doesn’t have to be determined right away. It is never too late for revenge, even if we have to wait for ten years,” Yue Buqun suggested.

“Are you suggesting that we run away?” Madam Yue asked.

“We are not running away. We are only avoiding them temporarily. Right now the enemies outnumber us. We only have two, how could we beat the five of them all together? Since you have already killed one of the freaks, we have really gotten the upper hand of it already. Avoiding them temporarily will do no harm to our Huashan School’s reputation. Besides, as long as we keep this to ourselves, outsiders would never know anything about it,” Yue Buqun explained.

Madam Yue said with a sob, “Even though I killed one of the freaks, Chong could die any minute now. We really only…only got even in this conflict. Chong…Chong….” She paused for a second and then said, “Alright, let’s use your idea. We’ll bring Chong together with us and then try to heal his injury gradually.”

Yue Buqun heaved a sigh but didn’t answer.

“Do you mean that we can’t bring Chong with us?” Madam Yue asked anxiously.

“Chong’s injury is very severe. If we bring him with us and travel at double the speed, he won’t even last for an hour,” Yue Buqun replied.

“Then…then what? Isn’t there anything we can do to save him?” Madam Yue asked in despair.

“Alas, I was determined to teach him the ‘Divine Art of Violet Twilight’ the other day. Who would have expected that he went off into wild flights of imagination and tumbled into the evil route of the Sword-Branch? If he had begun studying the secret formula, even just a page or two of it, he would have been able to manage his own inner energy for self-healing and not worry about the six heterodox energy streams.” Yue Buqun heaved a sigh.

“This matter brooks no delay. Why don’t you go teach him the ‘Divine Art of Violet Twilight’ right away? Maybe he won’t be able to understand all of it in his current sick state, but it would still be better than not learning it at all. Or, you can leave the ‘Violet Twilight Manuscript’ with him so he can study on his own following the book.” Madam Yue jumped onto her feet.

Yue Buqun held Madam Yue’s hands into his own and said softly, “Junior apprentice sister, my love for Chong is no less than yours. But think about it. He has been so severely injured. How could he pay attention to me when I teach him the formulas and the various techniques? If I leave the ‘Violet Twilight Manuscript’ with him so he could study from the book by himself when his mind becomes clearer, then when those five freaks come back to Mount Huashan in no time, since Chong would not be capable of defending himself, what’s going to happen to this most valued Qi-Gong manuscript of our Huashan School? Those five freaks would get their hands onto it for sure. And if those heterodox people get hold of the supreme orthodox Qi-Gong manuscript of our Huashan School, and was able to use it to help them harm the society a great deal more, I, Yue Buqun, would stand condemned through the ages.”

Thinking that her husband’s words were quite reasonable, Madam Yue couldn’t help but shed more tears.

“Those five freaks don’t do things in the ordinary order. No one can predict what they might do next. We don’t have any time to waste. Let’s get on the road right away,” Yue Buqun said.

“Are we just going to leave Chong here and let those five freaks torture him more? I’ll stay to guard him,” Madam Yue proposed.

As soon as the words came out of her mouth, she immediately realized that it was just an act on impulse of an ordinary housewife, not something that would suit her status as the “Heroine of the Huashan School.” If she stayed, it would only result in sacrificing one more life for nothing. How could she protect Linghu Chong at all? Besides, if she had decided to stay, then how would her husband and daughter ever agree to leave Mount Huashan without her? Feeling great worries and sorrows, her tears poured down nonstop.

Yue Buqun shook his head and let out a long sigh. He moved aside his pillow and took out a thin iron box. After removing the lid, he took out a brocade-covered booklet. Putting the booklet inside his chest pocket, he pushed the door open and walked out. To his surprise, he found Yue Lingshan standing outside the door.

“Daddy, I am afraid that big apprentice brother…is not going to pull through,” Yue Lingshan said.

“What happened?” Yue Buqun asked in shock.

“He keeps raving about things and it seems that he is in a state of delirium,” Yue Lingshan replied.

“What did he rave about?” Yue Buqun asked.

“I don’t understand what he raved about,” Yue Lingshan answered with a blush.

It turned out that under the torment from those six energy streams in his body, and seeing Yue Lingshan standing right in front of him, in his wooziness, Linghu Chong blunted out without thinking,

“Little apprentice sister, I…I really miss you! Have you fallen in love with apprentice brother Lin and decided to ignore me now?”

Even in her wildest imagination, Yue Lingshan had never expected that Linghu Chong would ask such a question right in front of Lin Pingzhi. She blushed big

time, feeling ultimately embarrassed. Then she heard Linghu Chong murmuring again.

"Little apprentice sister, we grew up together since we were kids. We played together and practiced sword art together. I…I really don't know how and where I displeased you. If you are mad at me, you can punch me. You can swear at me. Even if…even if you stab me with your sword I won't have any complaints. But please don't be so cold to me and totally ignore me…."

Linghu Chong had been thinking about those words again and again inwardly over the last couple of months. If he were to be conscious, he would not have dared to speak them out even if he was with Yue Lingshan alone. But since he had no self-constraint at the moment, he really spilled his heart out.

"I'll just be outside," Lin Pingzhi said in embarrassment.

"No, no! You stay here and watch over big apprentice brother," Yue Lingshan uttered and then rushed out of the door.

She ran straight toward her parents' room, but when she arrived at the door, she heard the using "Divine Art of Violet Twilight" to heal the injury discussion between her parents, so she waited at the door, daring not to interrupt.

"Go send out my order to everyone. I want everybody to come to the 'House of Integrity'," Yue Buqun said to Yue Lingshan.

"Yes, but what about big apprentice brother? Who's going to care for him?" Yue Lingshan asked.

"Tell Dayou to look after him," Yue Buqun answered.

Yue Lingshan took the order and then went on her way to inform everyone. Soon, all of Huashan School apprentices had gathered in the "House of Integrity" and lined up based on school seniority. Yue Buqun sat down in the armchair in the middle. Madam Yue sat in a chair next to him.

After casting a quick glance at the crowd and confirming that all except Linghu Chong and Lu Dayou had arrived. Yue Buqun started addressing all the apprentices.

“Among last generation senior masters of our sword school, some of them strayed into the wrong road. They kept perfecting sword techniques but ignored the practice of inner energy with Qi-Gong techniques. They hardly realized that all advanced martial arts require Qi-Gong techniques to build a solid foundation. If one can’t master Qi-Gong techniques, then regardless of how well he has mastered his sword techniques, he would never be able to reach the acme of martial arts. But unfortunately, those last generation senior masters obstinately stuck to a wrong course. They went on their own way to create a new branch called Huashan Sword-Branch and called our orthodox Kung Fu Huashan Qi-Branch. The dispute between the Qi-Branch and the Sword-Branch went on for many decades, which greatly obstructed the development and growth of our Huashan School. What a great calamity it is.” He paused and heaved a deep sigh.

Madam Yue thought inwardly, “Those five freaks could show up any moment, and you are still here telling old stories with leisure.” She cast a side-glance to her husband but dared not to interrupt. Throwing a peek at the inscribed board where it said “House of Integrity,” she thought to herself, “At the time when I first joined Huashan School to learn sword art, the words inscribed on the board were really ‘Force of Sword Towering the Clouds.’ But now it has been changed to ‘House of Integrity.’ No one even remembers where the old board might be. Alas, I was only a thirteen-year-old little girl at the time. Now…now….”

Yue Buqun continued. “But what’s righteous and what’s evil, what’s right and what’s wrong, the truth would eventually shine at the end. Twenty-five years ago, the Sword-Branch took a crushing defeat and withdrew from our Huashan School. I have been the Head Master of the Huashan School ever since. Several days ago, a group of expelled apprentices of our school, Feng Buping, Cheng Buyou, and some others, came back to Mount Huashan. I am not sure how they did it, but they succeeded in convincing the Alliance Chief of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, Chief Zuo, by cheats and lies, and came to seize the Head Master post of our Huashan School with Alliance Chief Zuo’s Command Flag. I have been holding the post of Head Master in our school for many years. There are plenty of tedious internal tasks associated with the job, not mentioning all the things to deal with when the five sword schools meet. I’ve long thought

about relinquishing my post in favor of somebody more qualified, so I could dedicate myself to the task of studying advanced Qi-Gong techniques of our school. I should really be only too glad to hear that somebody is willing to take over with the duties." At that word, he paused again.

"Master, Feng Buping and the other Sword-Branch expelled apprentices have all gone on the evil route. They are really no different from members of the Demon Cult. We should never even let them come back to join our Huashan School, how can we ever let them take the Head Master post of our school with their wishful thinking?" Gao Gengming commented.

"We'll never let their audacious plot succeed!" Lao Denuo, Liang Fa, Shi Daizi, and the rest of the apprentices exclaimed all together.

Seeing that all the apprentices' feeling ran high, Yue Buqun let out a slight smile. "It's really not important whether I am the Head Master or not. But if the heterodox people from the Sword-Branch ruled our school, all the hundreds of years worth of Huashan School's vast comprehensive and profound Kung Fu techniques would all be destroyed in a moment. When we one day return to the underworld, how would we ever face the spirits of many generations of Huashan School senior masters? And the reputation of our Huashan School would be held in contempt by everyone in the Martial World."

"That's right! How can we ever let that happen?" Lao Denuo and the bunch of apprentices said in unison.

"I wouldn't worry too much about Feng Buping and the rest of the Sword-Branch expelled apprentices," Yue Buqun went on. "But since they were able to bring the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance and also able to collaborate with people from Songshan, Taishan, and Hengshan those schools, this is no small matter. That's why…." He swept his eyes over the apprentices and then spoke again. "We'll be leaving today to see Alliance Chief Zuo at Mount Songshan, and have it out with him."

All the apprentices were shocked. The Songshan Sword School was the leader in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, and the Head Master of the Songshan

School, Zuo Lengchan, was considered a top notch in the Martial World. Not only had his Kung Fu skills reached the acme of perfection, his reputation as a quick-witted and resourceful mind was also well known. Anytime when the name “Alliance Chief Zuo” was mentioned, everyone would get a shiver of cold. In the Martial World, when one had it out with someone else, the dispute normally wouldn’t stop at an oral discussion. Any heated word might lead to a fierce physical fight. All the apprentices couldn’t help but thinking the same thought.

“Master’s Kung Fu is excellent, but he most likely is still no match for Alliance Chief Zuo. Besides, the Songshan School’s Alliance Chief Zuo has twelve apprentice brothers. People in the Martial World call them the ‘Thirteen Guardians of Songshan.’ Even though ‘Great Songyang Palm’ Fei Bin has passed away, there are still a total of twelve of them left. And each of the twelve is a first-class elite fighter – someone a second-generation Huashan apprentice would have no chance of resisting. Isn’t it a bit too reckless to stir up trouble on Mount Songshan?”

Every one of the apprentices thought so, yet no one dared to speak up.

Hearing what her husband had just said, Madam Yue immediately praised inwardly. “This idea is awesome! We are leaving our base, Mount Huashan, so we could avoid the five Peach Valley’s freaks. Once the news spreads out, Huashan School would have no face left. But if we were heading up Mount Songshan to have it out with Alliance Chief Zuo, others would only admire our courage. Alliance Chief Zuo is not the unreasonable type. Once we get to Mount Songshan, it’s not necessary that we’ll end up in a deadly fight. There’s gonna be a lot of rooms and cushions in between.” So she immediately picked up the line.

“That’s right! Feng Buping did bring the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance up Mount Huashan. But who knows, he could very possibly have stolen or robbed the Command Flag from someone else. Even if it’s true that Alliance Chief Zuo did award them the Command Flag of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, this is the internal matter of our Huashan School.

The Songshan School has no say in this at all. Sure, Songshan School has a lot more members, and Alliance Chief Zuo has superb Kung Fu skills, but we, Huashan School members, would rather die than submit. Any one of you who has no guts and is afraid might as well stay."

None of the apprentices wanted to look like a coward, so they all answered, "We will follow Master and Master-Wife's orders and never hesitate to go through fire and water for Master and Master-Wife."

"Perfect! The matter brooks no delay. Go pack your stuff. We'll get on the road in one hour." Madam Yue commanded.

Before starting the trip, Madam Yue went to check on Linghu Chong again. Seeing Linghu Chong's lifeless face, she felt great pain and grievance deep in her heart. But the five Peach Valley's freaks could come back in any moment. She simply couldn't risk having Mount Huashan completely wiped out just for Linghu Chong's sake. So she had Lu Dayou move Linghu Chong into the little hut at the back.

"Dayou," she said, "we are going to Mount Songshan to have it out with Alliance Chief Zuo for the sake of our Huashan School's future. This is going to be a very risky trip. We just hope that under the direction from your Master, we will be able to uphold justice and all come back safely. Chong's injury is very severe. You will take good care of him. If any enemy comes to attack, try your best to avoid conflict even if you have to endure humiliation. Don't get Chong and yourself killed for nothing."

Lu Dayou nodded his acknowledgement with tears in his eyes.

After Lu Dayou saw Master, Master-Wife, and all the apprentice brothers and sisters off Mount Huashan, he went back to the little hut where Linghu Chong was resting. By now, the entire Huashan School on Mount Huashan only had two residents – one was his big apprentice brother who was still in a coma, the other one was himself, completely alone and on his own. He found himself in a state of anxiety. The deepening dusk only made him more afraid of the unforeseen future.

After making a pot of rice soup in the kitchen, he filled a bowl and propped Linghu Chong up to have some. Only at the third swallow, Linghu Chong coughed all the soup out. The white rice soup had turned red. Linghu Chong must have coughed all the blood in his stomach out together with it. While feeling terrified, Lu Dayou helped Linghu Chong lie down again. Setting the soup bowl down, he stared at the darkness outside of the window blankly and fell into a trance. He had no idea how long he had been in a daze when several owl hoots woke him.

"It is said that when an owl hoots, it is really counting a patient's eyebrows," he thought. "By the time the owl finishes counting, it would be the moment for the patient to die." So he put his finger into his mouth to gather some spit and then smeared it on Linghu Chong's eyebrows so the owl would have a real hard job counting them.

Suddenly sounds of footsteps came from the mountain path. Lu Dayou blew out the oil lamp hurriedly. His sword in his hand, he guarded by Linghu Chong's bedside. The sounds came closer and closer, and it seemed that someone was heading straight toward the little hut. Lu Dayou's heart almost jumped out of his chest. He thought to himself, "It seems that the enemy knows very well that big apprentice brother is resting over here. That's terrible! How can I protect big apprentice brother from any harm?"

Then he heard a girl's voice whispering into the room, "Monkey Six, are you inside?" It turned out to be the voice of Yue Lingshan.

"Is that little apprentice sister? I…I am in here," Lu Dayou answered with unspeakable joy. He lit the oil lamp again, but in the hurry and excitement, he splashed the oil all over his hands.

Yue Lingshan pushed the door open and walked in. "How's big apprentice brother?" she asked.

"He just coughed some more blood," Lu Dayou answered.

Yue Lingshan walked by the bedside and reached out to feel Linghu Chong's forehead. It was burning hot.

“How come he’s coughing blood again?” she asked in a frown.

Suddenly, Linghu Chong spoke out. “Little…little apprentice sister, is it you?”

“Yes, big apprentice brother. How do you feel right now?” Yue Lingshan asked softly.

“I…I’m feeling…alright,” Linghu Chong murmured.

Yue Lingshan took out a pack from her chest pocket.

“Big apprentice brother, this is ‘Violet Twilight Manuscript.’ Dad said that….”

“Violet Twilight Manuscript?” Linghu Chong uttered in surprise.

“That’s right. Dad said that you are suffering from heterodox Kung Fu masters’ energy streams and only our own school’s most supreme inner energy techniques can dissolve them. Monkey Six, you read the manuscript word by word for big apprentice brother. But you must not study any of it yourself. Otherwise, if Dad finds out about it, humph, you know the consequences,” Yue Lingshan exclaimed.

Lu Dayou was overjoyed. He answered hurriedly, “I am just a bum. How would I ever dare to secretly study the most supreme inner energy techniques of our school? You can rest assured. This is great! In order to save big apprentice brother’s life, Master is even willing to make an exception and bestow the manuscript to him. Thank goodness, big apprentice brother can be saved now.”

“You must not mention this to anyone. I stole the manuscript from underneath my dad’s pillow,” Yue Lingshan whispered.

“Whaaaat? Did you just say that you stole Master’s…Master’s manuscript of inner energy techniques? What if Master finds it out?” Lu Dayou was shocked.

“So what? You think I am gonna get killed for doing this? Dad will probably give me a good beating and scolding at most. If big apprentice brother could survive because of it, Mom and Dad will surely be overjoyed and forgive me for what I did,” Yue Lingshan answered.

“Right! Right! Saving life is the more urgent matter here,” Lu Dayou said in

agreement.

"Little apprentice sister, you bring it back to…to Master," Linghu Chong suddenly interrupted.

"Why?" Yue Lingshan asked in surprise. "It was no easy task to steal the manuscript, and I had to travel miles of mountain path in the dark to make it back. Why don't you want it? This is not a matter of studying Kung Fu on the sly; this is a matter of life and death."

"She's right! Big apprentice brother, you don't have to study everything out of it, just enough so you can dissolve those six freaks' evil energy streams. Then you can return the manuscript back to Master. By then, Master will probably bestow the manuscript to you officially. You are the head apprentice of our school, so of course you are the one who will get awarded this manuscript. Who else will ever have the opportunity? You are only getting it a bit earlier. What's the matter?" Lu Dayou couldn't agree more.

"I…I would rather die than disobey Master's will," Linghu Chong replied. "Master said it before that I can't…study the Divine Art of Violet Twilight. Little…little apprentice sister, little…little apprentice sister…." Not able to catch his breath, Linghu Chong fell unconscious again.

Yue Lingshan checked under his nose. The breathing was weak, but at least he was still breathing. After a sigh, she said to Lu Dayou, "I've got to head back. Mom and Dad are gonna be so worried if I don't make it back to the temple by dawn. Talk to big apprentice brother, will you? Ask him to do as I said and study the Violet Twilight Manuscript. Tell him to not forget that…." She blushed for a second and then finished the sentence. "…I went through all the trouble of running about just for him."

"I will definitely talk to him," Lu Dayou replied. "Little apprentice sister, where are you lodging at?"

We lodged at White-Horse Temple tonight," Yue Lingshan answered.

"Oh, White-Horse Temple is like ten miles from here. Little apprentice sister, I am sure big apprentice brother will never forget the trouble you have gone

through to make a twenty-mile round trip in one night."

"I only wish that he could survive and recover. That would be the best. What does it matter if he remembers this or not?" Yue Lingshan sobbed.

She gently set the Violet Twilight Manuscript booklet at the head of the bed. After staring at Linghu Chong's face for a moment, she ran out of the door.

Linghu Chong didn't wake up until over two hours later. Before he even opened his eyes, he had already cried out, "Little…apprentice sister, little apprentice sister!"

"She left already," Lu Dayou said.

"She left?" Linghu Chong cried out. All of a sudden, he sat up and grabbed onto Lu Dayou's collar band.

That gave Lu Dayou a good jolt. He explained hurriedly, "Yes, little apprentice sister has left. She said that if she couldn't make it back before dawn, Master and Master-Wife would get worried. Big apprentice brother, why don't you lie down to rest?"

"She…she left? She left with apprentice brother Lin?" Linghu Chong murmured as if he didn't catch any of Lu Dayou's words.

"She is together with Master and Master-Wife," Lu Dayou explained. But Linghu Chong only responded with a blank stare and a twitched face.

"Big apprentice brother," Lu Dayou said in a soft voice, "little apprentice sister cares about you very much. A young girl like her, running back from White-Horse Temple late at night, making a round trip of twenty miles, she really has deep affections for you. Before she left, she urged me again and again. She wants you to study the Violet Twilight Manuscript and not to forget…forget her feelings for you."

"Did she say that?" Linghu Chong asked.

"Yeah! Would I dare lie to you?" Lu Dayou replied.

Linghu Chong could no longer hold himself steady. The back of his head

banged heavily against the brick bed as he fell back down, but he didn't feel any pain at all.

That gave Lu Dayou another jolt.

"Big apprentice brother, let me read it for you," Lu Dayou said. He picked up the Violet Twilight Manuscript. Turning to the first page, he started reading.

"All forms of martial arts use inner energy as the base. The vast amount of righteous energy is bestowed upon us from Heaven. But ordinary people are ignorant of the right way to preserve the energy and let their emotions to stand in the way instead. The perils of a martial are violent, arrogant, cruel, and evil. Being violent causes disturbance to the spirit, thus disrupts the energy flow; being arrogant causes separation of spirit, thus makes the energy impetuous; being cruel causes the void of humanity, thus drains the energy source; being evil causes vicious behavior, thus shortens the energy breath. Those four perils are all like blades that would block and cut off energy flow…."

"What are you reading?" Linghu Chong asked.

"That was the first chapter of the Violet Twilight Manuscript," Lu Dayou answered. "And after those, it's like this…," he went on reading.

"Abstain the four perils and return to many types of delicate kindness. Restrain your violent and cruel emotion to preserve your righteous energy stream. Beat the Heaven Drum, drink the Jade Honey, rinse the Corona Pool, and tap the Golden Beam.[7] Follow the way and soon the effect will show."

"This is the secret formula of our school. By reading it recklessly, you have already violated our school rule. Put it away immediately," Linghu Chong admonished in a strict voice.

"Big apprentice brother, in urgent circumstances, a true man would do what is expedient, instead of rigidly adhere to details. Right now it's more important to save your life. Let me read to you some more," Lu Dayou said. He went on reading and the scripts started explaining the details of the advanced Qi-Gong techniques like how to "beat the Heaven Drum and drink the Jade Honey" and how to "rinse the Corona Pool and tap the Golden Beam."

“Shut up!” Linghu Chong yelled out loudly.

Lu Dayou was taken by shock. He raised his head and asked, “Big apprentice brother, are you…are you alright? Where does it hurt?”

“My entire body hurts when I hear…hear you read Master’s…manuscript of inner energy techniques. Are you trying to make me a…disloyal and dishonorable man?” Linghu Chong roared angrily.

“No, no! How would that make you disloyal and dishonorable?” Lu Dayou was astounded.

“Master brought the Violet Twilight Manuscript up to the ‘Cliff of Contemplation’ the other day and wanted to teach me the techniques. But he found out that not only my way of practicing was way off, but also my natural endowment, so he changed his mind…mind….” Linghu Chong panted heavily and had a hard time to speak on.

“This time, it’s for the sake of saving your life, not about studying the Kung Fu in sly, so…so it’s a totally different matter,” Lu Dayou argued.

“As apprentices, which is more important, our own lives or Master’s orders?” Linghu Chong asked.

“The most important thing is that Master and Master-Wife both want you to stay alive, let alone…let alone little apprentice sister’s affections for you. She had to make such a long round trip late at night. How can you let her down?” Lu Dayou said.

Linghu Chong felt a sudden urge to cry but he worked hard to hold the tears back.

“Just because she…she brought it here for me…I…Linghu Chong am a man with pride. Why would I ever take pity from others?”

As soon as those words came out, his body shivered as he pondered upon himself, “I am never a stickler for regulations. In order to save myself, what’s the big deal if I do study the inner energy techniques of our own school? So the real reason why I don’t want to study the Divine Art of Violet Twilight is

because I am mad at little apprentice sister. Deep in my heart, I resented the fact that little apprentice treats apprentice brother Lin with much affection and treats me coldly. Linghu Chong, look at you. When have you become so stingy?" But when he thought that by the time of dawn, Yue Lingshan would join Lin Pingzhi again on the long trip to Mount Songshan and they would travel side by side, chatting and singing folk songs together again, he could no longer hold on to his tears.

"Big apprentice brother, you've thought it wrong. Little apprentice sister grew up together with you. You…you are almost like brother and sister," Lu Dayou persuaded.

"That's exactly what I don't want to be: brother and sister," Linghu Chong thought, but he couldn't speak it out loud.

Lu Dayou continued. "I'll read on. You listen carefully. If you can't memorize it, I'll read it a couple of more times. All forms of martial arts use inner energy as the base. The vast amount of righteous energy is bestowed upon us from Heaven…."

"Stop it!" Linghu Chong yelled out in a stern voice.

"Sure, sure, big apprentice brother," Lu Dayou answered. "In hope for your speedy recovery, I have no other choice but to disobey your order. I'll take all the blames for breaking Master's order. You don't want to listen, but I just wouldn't let you. It was I, Lu Dayou, who insisted on reading it. You never even touched the Violet Twilight Manuscript with a finger of yours. You never looked at a word in the manuscript either. What's your fault? You are laid up in bed and simply can't help it. It's I, Lu Dayou, who forced you to study it. All forms of martial arts use inner energy as the base. The vast amount of righteous energy is bestowed upon us from Heaven…." He just read on and on in a flow of eloquence.

Linghu Chong tried to ignore it, but words after words forced their way into his ears. He suddenly groaned loudly.

"Big apprentice brother, are you alright?" Lu Dayou asked hurriedly.

“Will you please pad…pad my pillow…pillow a bit higher?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Sure.” Lu Dayou answered and reached forward to pad Linghu Chong’s pillow.

Suddenly, Linghu Chong jabbed forward with all this strength, and his finger jabbed right onto the Tan-Zhong Acupoint on Lu Dayou’s chest. Lu Dayou fell down onto the bed without even a groan.

“Sixth apprentice brother, I am sorry I have to do this. You can rest on bed for half a day and then your sealed acupoint…acupoint will open by itself.” Linghu Chong said with a wry smile.

Linghu Chong slowly struggled his way off the bed. Throwing a stare at the Violet Twilight Manuscript booklet for a moment, he finally heaved a sigh and walked by the door. Picking up the door bolt leaning against the wall, he used it as a crutch and stumbled out the door.

Greatly worried, Lu Dayou called out, “Big…big…where…are you… going…?”

Normally when someone’s Tan-Zhong Acupoint was sealed, he would not be able to talk at all, but because Linghu Chong was so weak, his jab only made Lu Dayou’s arms and legs numb and failed to completely paralyze him.

Linghu Chong turned his head back. “Sixth apprentice brother, I want to stay as far away from the Violet Twilight Manuscript as possible. I don’t want anyone to see my dead body next to the manuscript and think that I studied the supreme techniques on the sly and died from fire deviation…I don’t want to be looked down on by apprentice brother Lin….” At that word, he coughed again. More blood gushed out of his mouth and dripped down by his chin.

Afraid that he might not be able to leave at all with his almost exhausted strength from any more delay, he took a deep breath and walked forward with the help from the door bolt. Relying on his strong will, he slowly made his way forward and ultimately disappeared in the dark.

Chapter 12: Assassins

Translated by Lanny Lin



The fifteen masked men slowly approached forward, their thirty eyes shined through the holes on their masks like the eyes of fierce wild animals, filled with cruelty and hostility.

For every hundred feet, Linghu Chong had to take a break and lean on the door bolt to catch his breath. After about an hour of struggle, he managed to cover somewhat close to a quarter of a mile. He could see more and more golden flickers circle around him and suddenly the entire world swirled around

him. He almost fell down. Then he heard loud groans coming from inside the bushes right in front of him.

"Who's there?" Linghu Chong asked, stunned.

"Is that brother Linghu?" the man called out. "It's me, Tian Boguang! Ouch! Whew!" He was obviously in great pain.

"Tian…brother Tian? What…happened to you?" Linghu Chong asked in shock.

"I am dying! Brother Linghu, do me a favor, will you? Ouch…ouch…go ahead and kill me to end my misery!" Tian Boguang begged. He groaned as he spoke, but his voice remained loud and clear.

"Are…you…you…wounded?" Linghu Chong asked. But in the meantime, his knees gave out. He fell down and rolled to the roadside.

"Are you wounded too?" Tian Boguang asked in shock. "Ouch! Ouch! Who did it to you?"

"That's a long story. Tian…brother Tian, so who did that to you?"

"Alas, I don't know!" Tian Boguang answered.

"How come?" Linghu Chong asked.

"I was just walking on the road, and suddenly someone grabbed my two legs and two arms and lifted me off the ground. I couldn't even see who did it…," Tian Boguang answered.

"So it's the Peach Valley's Six Fairies again…. Why, brother Tian, aren't you in the same team?" Linghu Chong grinned.

"What do you mean we are in the same team?" Tian Boguang was at a loss.

"You came to invite me to go see little apprentice sister…Yilin. They…they also came…to invite…me to go see…her…." Linghu Chong started panting.

Tian Boguang crawled slowly out of the bush.

"God damn it! We are definitely not in the same team," Tian Boguang swore as

he shook his head angrily. “They came up Mount Huashan looking for a guy and asked me where the guy was. So I asked them who they were looking for. But they said that since they caught me, they get to ask me questions, and I don’t get to ask them anything. If I had caught them, then I would get to ask them questions and they would not get to ask me anything. They…ouch…they said that if I’ve got skills, it would be totally fine for me to lift them up, and then… then it would be my turn to ask them questions.”

Linghu Chong laughed out loud. But only after a few laughs he was already out of breath and had to stop.

“At that time, I was still hanging in mid-air facing down. How the heck could I lift them up even if I did have superb skills? What kind of horse dung was that?”

“So what happened next?” Linghu Chong asked.

“I said, ‘I never wanted to ask you. You are the ones asking here. Put me down.’ Then one of them said, ‘Since we’ve already lifted you up, if we don’t rip you into four pieces, wouldn’t it look real bad for us six great heroes?’ Another one asked, ‘Will he still be able to talk after we rip him into four pieces?’” Tian Boguang paused to catch his breath.

“Those six guys always resort to sophistry and tangle things in a mess. Brother Tian, that’s enough…enough of the story,” Linghu Chong said.

“Humph! The hell with them!” Tian Boguang cursed and went on.

“Then one of them said, ‘Duh, of course a guy in four pieces can’t talk. The six of us have ripped hundreds of people into four pieces before. When did you ever hear any of them talk after we ripped them apart?’

“Another one argued, ‘The reason why a guy in four pieces doesn’t talk is because we never asked him to. If we were to ask him anything, I am sure he wouldn’t dare not to answer.’

“Then a third one mocked, ‘He is already in four pieces. What’s there to be afraid of? There’s no point for him to dare. Would he be afraid that we’d rip

him into eight pieces?'

"The previous one said, 'Rip him into eight pieces? That Kung Fu is no small matter. We used to know that Kung Fu, but we must have forgotten it already.'"

Tian Boguang told the story in a disjointed manner. It was amazing that he memorized every little bit of it while being inflicted with serious injuries.

"Those six brothers are surely the rare kind in this world. They…they got me pretty good too," Linghu Chong said with a sigh.

"So brother Linghu, they wounded you too?" Tian Boguang asked in astonishment.

"Unfortunately so!" Linghu Chong heaved another sigh.

"To tell you the truth, when I was hanging in mid-air, I was really scared. So I shouted loudly, 'If you rip me into four pieces, I won't talk for sure. Even if my tongue is still capable of talking, I would be so pissed in my heart that I definitely wouldn't talk.'

"One of them said, 'Once we rip you into four pieces, your tongue is on one piece, and your heart is on another piece. How can you still relate what your tongue is gonna say with what you feel in your heart?'

"That was when I decided to throw nonsense right back at them. So I shouted, 'If you want to ask your question, better ask it quick. If you don't put me down right away, I am gonna let out my poisonous gas now.'

"One of them asked, 'Let out your poisonous gas? What do you mean?'

"I said, 'My farts stink like hell. Once it reaches you, you would not only lose your appetite for at least three days and three nights, you would also throw up so badly that even the stuff you ate three days ago would come back out of your mouth. I've warned you. Don't blame me for not telling you ahead of time.'"

"Hey, good point," Linghu Chong remarked with a weak smile.

"Yep," Tian Boguang replied, "as soon as those four guys heard my words, they all cried out in unison and threw me back down to the ground before

leaping back. I jumped back onto my feet and then saw six very odd-looking old folks, each covering his nose tightly with his hand, obviously afraid of my stinking farts. Brother Linghu, did you say that those six guys are called something like Peach Valley's Six Fairies?"

"That's right! Alas, too bad that I am not as smart as you, brother Tian, and didn't think of the stinking-fart…stratagem to scare them off. This stratagem of yours is really no less than the…the empty-city stratagem Zhu Geliang used that scared away Sima Yi's army."[8]

Tian Boguang let out a few hollow laughs and spilled out some more curses before continuing on with his story.

"I knew that those six guys are not to be trifled with, but as luck would have it, I left my blade on top of your 'Cliff of Contemplation.' So I figured that I'd better make it the banana and split, but those six guys had already stood in front of me in a line with their hands still covering their noses, and blocked my way like a wall made of flesh. Ha-ha, none of them dared to stand behind my back though. Seeing that there was no way I could make my way through, I turned around immediately, but who would have thought that those six guys could move like ghosts and somehow had already circled around to block in front of me again. I turned a couple more times but still could not get rid of them, so I walked backwards step after step until my back touched the precipice wall. The six freaks burst with joy and chortled as they asked again and again. 'Where is he? Where is that guy?'

"I asked, 'Who are you looking for?'

"Those six freaks said in unison, 'We have surrounded you. You've got nowhere to go. You must answer our question.'

"One of them said, 'If it were you who have surrounded us and we've got nowhere to go, then you could ask us and we would have to answer your question.'

"Another one argued, 'He is only by himself. How will he be able to surround the six of us?'

“The previous one said, ‘What if he had superb skills and could beat the six of us all by himself?’

“The second one said, ‘Then he is capable of beating us, not surrounding us.’

“The previous one said, ‘But what if he drove us into a cave and blocked the entrance so none of us could get out? Wouldn’t you call that surrounding?’

“The second one argued, ‘That’s called blocking, not surrounding.’

“The previous one said, ‘Then what if he extends his arms and embraces all of us into his arms? Now that’s definitely called surrounding.’

“The second one argued, ‘First, nobody in this world has arms that long. Second, even if there are really people who have arms that long, this guy here does not. Third, even if he could embrace all of us with his arms, that’s called embracing, not surrounding.’

“The previous one pulled a long face and didn’t know how to argue that, yet he didn’t want to admit his defeat. After a few moment of dazing, he suddenly broke into loud laughter. ‘That’s it! If he keeps farting and surrounds us with his stinky gas so we couldn’t run away – wouldn’t you call that surrounding?’

“The other four freaks applauded and agreed in laughter, ‘He’s right! This chap surely can surround us.’

“An idea suddenly struck me. Wasting no time, I started running at once while shouting, ‘I…I am surrounding you now.’

“I figured, since they are so afraid of my farts, surely they wouldn’t go after me, but who would have thought that those six freaks had lightning fast speed. Only after a few steps, they had already grabbed hold of me. As soon as they caught me, they pressed down hard with tight grips and forced me to sit on top of a big rock, so that even if I did fart, my stinking gas wouldn’t come out.”

Linghu Chong couldn’t help but burst into loud laughter. Only after a few laughs, he felt great uneasiness from his chest and stopped laughing abruptly.

Tian Boguang went on.

“After those six freaks placed their tight grips on me, one of them asked, ‘Where does one’s gas come from?’

“Another one answered, ‘Gas comes from one’s intestines, then of course it belongs to the Yang-Ming Intestine Channel. I’d better seal his Shang-Yang, He-Gu, Qu-Chi, and Ying-Xiang those Acupoints.’

“Right after those words, he had already sealed those four acupoints with a simple wave. I’ve never seen such lightning fast yet extremely accurate acupoint-sealing techniques. That was something! I couldn’t help but admire him. After he sealed my acupoints, all six freaks let out of a breath of relief as if relieved of a heavy load. They said, ‘This stinking…stinking…stinking fart tank won’t be able to release his stinking gas now.’

“The one who sealed my acupoints asked again, ‘Hey, where on earth is that guy? If you don’t tell us, I’ll never release your sealed acupoints. Think about it, having gas yet not being able to let it out. You are gonna feel really bloated!’

“I thought to myself that when six freaks with such outstanding Kung Fu skills came to Mount Huashan, it’s obvious that they wouldn’t be looking for any ordinary person. Brother Linghu, at that time your respectful Master, Mr. Yue, and his wife weren’t on Mount Huashan. Even if they had come back, then of course they would be back in the ‘House of Integrity’ and would be very easy to locate. I thought about it back and forth and could only come up with one logical answer. Those six freaks must be looking for your Grand Uncle-Master, Grandmaster Feng.”

Linghu Chong felt a shock in his heart. “Did you tell them?” he asked in a hurry.

“Bah! What kind of person do you think I am?” Tian Boguang was very displeased. “I have already promised you that I would never let out Grandmaster Feng’s whereabouts. Are you saying that I, a gallant man, was just talking out of my ass?”

“Pardon me, brother Tian! My bad! Please don’t mind,” Linghu Chong apologized.

“If you still look down upon me, we’d better just sever at one blow – make it a clean break, and starting from now on, we are no friends.”

Linghu Chong remained silent and thought to himself, “You are the evil rapist that everyone in the Martial World holds in contempt. Who would ever consider you a friend? But since you could have killed me multiple times yet you never did, so I guess I do owe you a debt of gratitude.”

In the darkness, Tian Boguang couldn’t get a good look at Linghu Chong’s expression. Assuming that Linghu Chong’s silence meant his compromise, he continued on.

“Those six freaks just kept asking me. I said loudly, ‘I know the whereabouts of this person, but I will never tell. There are countless of peaks and valleys and caves on Mount Huashan. I am not going to tell you, and you will never find him in this life?’

“Those six freaks were enraged. They tormented and tortured me. But I simply ignored them afterwards. Brother Linghu, those six freaks’ Kung Fu skills are very eccentric. You’d better go tell Grandmaster Feng quickly. Even though his sword skills are splendid, it’s still better prepared than getting surprised.”

Tian Boguang mentioned that “The six freaks tormented and tortured me” in a very casual way, but Linghu Chong could easily imagine how much cruel and brutal torments actually were put on him and how much excruciating pain and suffering he had to endure. The six freaks had good intentions when they tried to heal his wounds, and what happened? Even now he was still suffering from the consequence. When they coerced Tian Boguang into telling the answer, it was not hard to imagine how nasty they could be. Feeling quite sorry for Tian Boguang, he said to him.

“You are a true man who keeps his words. You would rather die than let out my Grand Uncle-Master Feng’s whereabouts. But…but those Peach Valley’s Six Fairies were really looking for me, not my Grand Uncle-Master Feng.”

“Looking for you? Why are they looking for you?” Tian Boguang felt a big shock going through his entire body.

“They are just like you and were asked by little apprentice sister Yilin to invite me to go see…see her,” Linghu Chong answered.

That left Tian Boguang completely traumatized. He opened his mouth wide, yet nothing came out of it except deep groans. After a long while, Tian Boguang finally came back to his senses and spoke again.

“If I had known those six freaks were looking for you, I would have told them everything right away. Once those six freaks invite you over, I can just follow behind instead of rotting here on Mount Huashan dying from the poison. Well, if those six freaks got you, how come they didn’t carry you to go see the little Sister?”

“That’s really a long story,” Linghu Chong heaved a deep sigh. “Brother Tian, did you say something about rotting here on Huashan dying from the poison?”

“Didn’t I tell you earlier that someone sealed my Death Acupoints and planted strong poison in my body so he could compel me into inviting you over within one month to meet that little Sister? Only after I completed the mission successfully would he release my acupoints and give me the antidote. But I could neither invite you over, nor take you there by force, and ended up having wounds all over me from the torturing of those six freaks. It’s only like ten days away from the date the poison is scheduled to activate.”

“Where is little apprentice sister Yilin? How many days do you think it will take to get there?” Linghu Chong asked.

“You are willing to go now?” Tian Boguang asked.

“You spared my life on more than one occasion. Although you had many improper behaviors, I can’t just watch you die of poison for my sake right in front of my eyes. On that day when you tried to coerce me into complying, of course I would not bend. But it’s a completely different situation now,” Linghu Chong answered.

“The little Sister is in Shanxi Province. Alas…if we were still fit, it wouldn’t take more than six or seven days to get there on fast horses. But since we are both in such bad shape, forget about that,” Tian Boguang commented.

“I am only waiting for my final time here on Mount Huashan anyway. I’ll go with you. Who knows? Maybe God will give his blessings, so we will be able to hire some fast wagons that will take us into Shanxi Province within ten days,” Linghu Chong suggested.

“I have committed countless crimes in my life and harmed many innocent people. Why would God give me his blessings? Unless God had gone blind.” Tian Boguang grinned.

“Hmm, sometimes…sometimes God…does go blind. We are going to die anyway. There’s nothing to lose for trying it out.”

“That’s right! What’s the difference whether I die on the road or on Mount Huashan?” Tian Boguang applauded. “I think the first thing we need to do is to go down the mountain and find something to eat. Ever since I was dumped here, I could only eat unripe chestnuts off the ground. I am really craving for some decent food. Can you get up? Let me give you a hand.”

He offered to “give a hand,” yet couldn’t even get up himself. Linghu Chong wanted to give him a prop, but didn’t have any strength either. The two of them struggled for a while but achieved no progress whatsoever. Suddenly, both of them burst into loud laughter.

“I’ve been wandering in the Martial World for years, yet to find any bosom friend. But today I get to die here together with brother Linghu. What a joy it is!” Tian Boguang said.

“Later when my Master sees our corpses, he probably would assume that the two of us have ended in a common ruin after a fierce fight. Who would have guessed that we were still calling each other brothers before we kicked the bucket?” Linghu Chong let out a grin.

Tian Boguang reached out with his hand. “Brother Linghu, let’s shake hands before we die.”

Linghu Chong hesitated. Obviously Tian Boguang wanted to be intimate friends with him and share a common destiny. But Tian was the notorious evil rapist, and he was the disciple of a reputable sword school. How could he make

friends with someone like Tian? That day when he beat Tian several times in the contests and spared his life each time, he could still attribute that to the fact that Tian spared his life multiple times first. But to still mangle up with him today really couldn't be justified at all. With those thoughts, he reached out with his hand but stopped half way.

Tian Boguang only thought that Linghu Chong's wounds were too severe that he simply didn't have enough strength to move his arm. So he said loudly, "Brother Linghu, you are my intimate friend now. If you die because of your wounds before I die, I swear that I will not stay living alone."

Touched by the sincerity in Tian Boguang's words, Linghu Chong thought, "He surely deserves to be called a true friend." So he reached out with his hands and held Tian's right hand. "Brother Tian, at least we won't be heading to the underworld alone and die a lonely death," Linghu Chong said with a smile.

Before his words even faded, he suddenly heard a gloomy sneer rise from behind his back. Then a voice said, "Who would have expected the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School Qi-Branch to have sunk so low and made friends with a notorious evil rapist?"

"Who are you?" Tian Boguang yelled out.

Linghu Chong couldn't help but groan inwardly, "It's no big deal that I am gonna die from my severe wounds, but now I've just put Master's reputation in jeopardy. How terrible!"

In the darkness, he could vaguely see a shadow standing next to him with a long sword in his hand. The blade flashed dimly from the starlight.

"Linghu Chong, it's still not too late to take back what you said. Take this sword and waste that Tian-named evil rapist, then nobody will condemn you for making friends with him," the shadow said with a sneer as he threw his sword down, which cut into the ground and stood by its own.

Linghu Chong noticed that the blade of the sword was wide and broad – it was the type of sword used by the Songshan Sword School. So he asked,

“Which respectful member of the Songshan Sword School are you?”

“You surely have sharp eyes. I am Di Xiu from Songshan Sword School,” the man answered.

“So it’s apprentice brother Di. We haven’t had much chance to get to know each other. What respectful business are you tending here on Mount Huashan?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Head Uncle-Master[9] gave me the order to come to Mount Huashan and go on a trip of inspection to check if apprentices of the Huashan Sword School are really having bad conducts as the rumor says. Ha-ha, I didn’t expect to hear you speak straight from the heart about making friends with that evil rapist, right after I climb up Mount Huashan. I didn’t see that coming at all!” Di Xiu answered.

“You god damned punk, you think your Songshan Sword School is any better? Why don’t you go check on your own ill behavior before poking your nose into other people’s business?” Tian Boguang cursed.

Di Xiu raised his foot and threw a heavy kick at Tian Boguang’s head. “Humph, your end is imminent and you still won’t shut your dirty mouth?” he yelled. But Tian Boguang kept pouring out streams of abuses nonstop. It would have been a walkover if Di Xiu had wanted to kill Tian Boguang, but he decided to give Linghu Chong a good amount of humiliation first.

“Linghu Chong,” he sneered, “since the two of you find each other’s stinks congenial, I suppose you’ve made up your mind not to kill him?”

Linghu Chong was furious. He yelled loudly, “Whether I kill him or not, it’s none of your business. Give me the deathblow if you’ve got any guts. If you have no guts, then get your tail between your legs and get your ass off Mount Huashan.”

“So you are sure you won’t kill him, and would rather consider that evil rapist your good friend?” Di Xiu asked.

“No matter who I have as my friend, it beats having you as a friend,” Linghu

Chong answered.

"Right on! Way to go!" Tian Boguang cheered loudly.

"You just want to enrage me and provoke me into killing the two of you with a single blow. It's not going to be that easy. I am going to strip off your clothes and tie you two together naked. Then I'll seal your Mute Acupoint[10] and put on a tour of display around the Martial World. I'll tell everyone that I caught a macho guy and a sissy boy right when they were doing their illicit dirty stuff. Ha-ha, your Master Yue Buqun of the Huashan Sword School always pretends benevolence and righteousness, and puts on a face of a Confucian moralist to fool people. After today, would he still dare to call himself 'Gentleman Sword'?"

These words made Linghu Chong's anger explode, which knocked him out cold.

"Go to hell you…." Tian Boguang cursed, but his voice halted abruptly when Di Xiu sealed his acupoint around his waist with a swift kick.

With an evil grin on his face, Di Xiu reached out to start untying Linghu Chong's robe. Suddenly, a soft and brisk female voice rose behind his back.

"Hello, big brother, what are you doing here?"

In great surprise, Di Xiu turned his head around for a glance. In the dim light he could vaguely make out the shape of a woman. So he responded, "What are you doing here?'

Tian Boguang immediately recognized the girl's voice. It was none other than Yilin's voice. With a tremendous amount of joy, he shouted.

"Little…little Sister, it's you! That's wonderful. This god damned rat wants to…wants to kill your big brother Linghu."

He was going to say, "This god damned rat wants to kill me." But then a quick thought came upon him: Yilin wouldn't care about the "me" much at all. So he quickly changed that to "your big brother Linghu."

Hearing that the man lying on the ground was actually Linghu Chong, Yilin

was greatly worried. Wasting no time, she leapt forward and called out, “Big brother Linghu, is that you?”

Noticing how preoccupied Yilin was and how she put on no guard against him, Di Xiu bent his arm slightly and jabbed toward her acupoint under her rib cage with his index finger. His finger was just about to touch her clothes when suddenly his back collar tightened up as someone lifted him several feet off the ground. Terrified, Di Xiu elbowed back with his right arm, but it hit nothing. He immediately followed with a back kick using his left foot, but it hit nothing either. Horrified, he grabbed back with his hands when a huge hand came to his throat with a tight grip. Instantly, he could hardly breathe and lost all his strength to struggle.

By the time Linghu Chong slowly regained his consciousness, the first thing he noticed was a girl’s worried voice calling out, “Big brother Linghu! Big brother Linghu!” It sounded vaguely like the voice of Yilin. He opened his eyes, and sure enough, under the dim starlight, the pretty white face right in front of his eyes was no other than Yilin’s.

A thundering voice suddenly exploded, “Lin’er,[11] is this cripple the Linghu Chong you have mentioned?”

Linghu Chong looked up toward the origin of the voice, and what he saw shocked him. A chubby and enormous giant monk stood there, more like an iron tower than a human. The monk was at least seven feet tall. He extended his left arm out horizontally and lifted Di Xiu off the ground. Di Xiu’s arms hang still by his side. It was hard to tell if he was still breathing or not.

“Dad, he…he is big brother Linghu. But he is not a cripple,” Yilin said. She never took her eyes off Linghu Chong when she spoke and her eyes were filled with care, concern, and affection. It almost looked as if she really wanted to reach out to caress Linghu Chong’s face but was afraid to do it.

Linghu Chong was astounded. He couldn’t help but think to himself, “You are a little nun. How come you are calling this giant monk Dad? A monk having a daughter is already shocking, now when his daughter is actually a nun is simply

appalling!”

The giant monk let out some more thunder-like laughter. “You yearned for this Linghu Chong days and nights. I thought he must be a bulky and heroic looking guy. It turned out he’s just a tiny loser who couldn’t even fight back when bullied and had to pretend to be dead on the ground. What a cripple! I’d never want him as my son-in-law. Forget about him. Let’s go.”

“Who said I yearned for him days and nights?” Yilin rebuked him in great embarrassment. “You…you always like to talk nonsense. If you want to go, you can go by yourself. You don’t want…want….” She simply couldn’t repeat the words “don’t want him as son-in-law.”

Hearing that this monk had referred to him again and again as a “cripple” and a “loser,” Linghu Chong became furious. “Go as you wish! Who asked you to stay?” he scorned.

“You can’t go! You can’t go!” Tian Boguang shouted in worry.

“Why can’t he go?” Linghu Chong asked.

“I need him to release my Death Acupoints. I also need his antidotes for the strong poison planted in me. If he leaves, I am dead and gone!” Tian Boguang said.

“Are you afraid now? I said that I’d die together with you, didn’t I. Once your poison activates, I’ll just cut my own throat to go along with you.”

The giant monk chortled and the thundering sound echoed in the valley.

“Excellent! Excellent! Excellent! So this lad actually has some backbone. Lin’er, he is certainly to my liking. But there’s one more thing I have to get a clear answer. Does he drink wine or not?”

Before Yilin even had a chance to answer, Linghu Chong had already yelled out. “I certainly do. Why not? Your old man here drinks in the mornings, in the evenings, and even in my dreams. Once you get to see how addicted I am, I assure you that you’ll tremble with rage because you are a damn monk whose commandments prohibit you from eating flesh, drinking wine, killing people,

saying lies, and blah, blah, blah!"

"Lin'er, you tell him. What's your dad's name for the Buddhist's order?"[12] The giant monk broke into a loud laughter.

"Big brother Linghu, my dad's name in the Buddhist's order is called 'No Commandment'," Yilin explained with a smile. "He is a member of the Buddhist order, but he doesn't follow any of the regulations, taboos, and commandments for Buddhists, that's why his name in the Buddhist's order is called 'No Commandment.' Now, please don't laugh at this. He drinks wine, eats flesh, kills people, steals money, and even…even gave…gave birth to me." At that final word, she could no longer hold her amusement and broke into giggles.

"Hey, I am very delighted…delighted to meet monks of this type!" Linghu Chong burst into loud laughter. He struggled to stand up, but was short of enough strength. Yilin rushed to prod him up.

"Uncle," Linghu Chong said with a smile, "since you are open to all kinds of things, why don't you simply resume secular life? There's no need to put yourself in this Buddhist robe."

"Aha, there's something you don't know. Because I am open to all things, that's how I decided to become a monk. I fell in love with a beautiful nun just like you…." Monk No Commandment explained.

"Dad, you are talking nonsense without thinking again," Yilin cut him off. Her face was completely red from a blush; fortunately, it was dark at night, so no one noticed it.

"A true man is always open and aboveboard. I did it, and I admit it, regardless of how others laugh at me or condemn me. Monk No Commandment is a true man that speaks the truth! What's there to be afraid of?" Monk No Commandment replied.

"Precisely!" Linghu Chong and Tian Boguang cheered in unison.

Hearing the agreements, Monk No Commandment was quite pleased, so he continued, "The beautiful nun that I fell in love with was, of course, her

mother.”

“Turned out that little apprentice sister Yilin’s dad is a monk and her mother is a nun,” Linghu Chong thought to himself amusedly.

Monk No Commandment went on, “I was a butcher at that time and fell in love with her mother, but her mother paid no attention to me. I was at my wit’s end and had no other choice but to join the Buddhist’s order. I thought that since nuns and monks are all members of the Buddhist’s order, like a big family, then when a nun doesn’t love a butcher, maybe she would love a monk.”

“Dad, when are you going to watch your mouth before you speak? You are already a grown up, but you still talk like a child,” Yilin said with a spat.

“Did I speak the untruth? But at the time I didn’t realize that once one becomes a monk, he can no longer go out with any woman, not even nuns, and it was actually more difficult for me to date her mom, so I didn’t want to be a monk no more. But my teacher insisted that I had some kind of trait perfect for a member of the Buddhist order, so he refused to let me resume secular life. Her mother somehow got muddleheaded and was deeply moved by my true love, and soon this little nun came to this world. Chong, it’s much easier for you now. You don’t have to join the Buddhist’s order and become a monk to date my little nun daughter.”

Linghu Chong was greatly embarrassed. He thought to himself, “When apprentice sister Yilin was taken prisoner by Tian Boguang, I put in my effort following the righteous course. She is a nun from the Heng-Shan Sword School who believes in Buddhism. How can she get involved into love relationship with any secular man? It was probably only because she met men close to her age the first time and lost control of herself temporarily that she sent Tian Boguang and Peach Valley’s Six Fairies to invite me over. I must avoid her as soon as possible. If the reputation of the Huashan Sword School and the Heng-Shan Sword School were damaged in any way because of me, even if I died, Master and Master-Wife would still condemn me, and little apprentice sister Lingshan would still look down upon me.”

Yilin looked very bashful. “Dad, big brother Linghu already…already has the person of his heart. He would never pay attention to others. You…you…you’d better never mention that again. You would only get laughed at.”

“This chap has another lover? This is pissing me off!” Monk No Commandment yelled angrily. He reached forward with his right arm. The huge palm, almost as big as a cattail leaf fan, shot at Linghu Chong’s chest. Linghu Chong couldn’t even keep his balance let along dodge the attack. The hand got a good grip of Linghu Chong’s robe and lifted him off the ground.

With his left hand grabbing at Di Xiu’s back collar and his right hand grabbing at Linghu Chong’s chest, Monk No Commandment extended both of his arms out flat and looked as if he was carrying the two with a shoulder pole. Linghu Chong didn’t have much strength to start with, now in the mid air, he hanged there like a ragged bag.

“Dad, put big brother Linghu down immediately! If you don’t put him down, I am gonna be angry now,” Yilin shouted in a hurry.

As soon as Monk No Commandment heard the word “angry” from his daughter, he dropped Linghu Chong in no time, looking very afraid. “Which beautiful little nun did he set his eyes on? This is outrageous!” he babbled. Since he had fallen in love with a beautiful nun, he felt that other than beautiful nuns, there wasn’t anyone else who deserved to be loved.

“The person of big brother Linghu’s heart is his apprentice sister Miss Yue,” Yilin explained.

Monk No Commandment let out a loud roar, which created an uncomfortable buzz in everyone’s ears. “Who’s this girl named Yue?” he yelled. “Damn it! If she isn’t a beautiful little nun, what’s so lovely about her? I’ll break the damn girl’s little neck as soon as I see her!”

Linghu Chong thought to himself, “This Monk No Commandment is a crude and reckless man, and he is similar to the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies in a sense. Seems that he will live up to his words. What if he really harms the little apprentice sister?”

“Dad, big brother Linghu is severely wounded. Please hurry to heal his wounds. There’s plenty of time to talk over other things later,” Yilin suggested, feeling greatly worried.

Monk No Commandment always acted upon whatever his daughter said. “That’s fine. Let’s heal his wounds. What’s so difficult about that?” he said. He tossed Di Xiu behind his back with a random wave and then asked Linghu Chong loudly, “How were you wounded?” Cries of pain continued as Di Xiu rolled down the small hill.

“I took a palm strike from someone on my chest. But that wasn’t critical….” Linghu Chong replied.

“Palm strike on the chest? He must have shaken your Ren Passage pretty good….” Monk No Commandment concluded.

“The Peach Valley….” Linghu Chong tried to explain.

“There’s no whatever Peach Valley in the Ren Passage,” Monk No Commandment cut him off. “Your Huashan School’s inner energy is no good, no wonder you don’t understand. Sure, there’s one called Combined Valley Acupoint among the various human acupoints, but that belongs to the Hand-To-Intestine Yang-Ming Channel and is positioned right between thumb and index finger. It has nothing to do with the Ren Passage. Very well, let me heal your wound in the Ren Passage.”

“No, no! The Peach Valley’s Six….” Linghu Chong said in a hurry.

“What Peach Valley Six, Peach Valley Seven?” Monk No Commandment waved him off. “Among the various acupoints, there’re Hand-Three-Li, Foot-Three-Li, Yin-Ling-Quan, and Si-Kong-Zhu. Where did Peach Valley Six or Peach Valley Seven come from? Now shut up and stop the nonsense.” At that word, he swung his hand and sealed Linghu Chong’s Mute Point.

“I’ll send my supreme inner energy into your Ren Passage through the Cheng-Jiang, Tian-Tu, Tan-Zhong, Jiu-Wei, Ju-Yue, Zhong-Wan, Qi-Hai, Shi-Men, Guan-Yuan, and Zhong-Ji Acupoints. Your wound will heal as soon as my energy flows through. I bet that after seven or eight days, you’ll be back to

normal, as cool as a cucumber," Monk No Commandment said as he reached out with the two fan-sized hands.

He placed his right hand on the Cheng-Jiang Acupoint by Linghu Chong's chin, and his left hand on the Zhong-Ji Acupoint by Linghu Chong's lower abdomen, and then started sending two streams of inner energy in through the two acupoints. All of a sudden, he felt a tremendous shock from his hands as the two streams of energy clashed with the six energy streams left by the Peach Valley's Six Fairies. Astounded, he uttered a cry of surprise.

"Dad, how did it go?" Yilin asked in a hurry.

"There are several bizarre energy streams in his body," Monk No Commandment responded. "One, two, three, four. There are a total of four… wait…there's one more. That's a total of five energy streams. These five energy streams…Aha, another one came out. What the hell, six streams of energy! Fine! Let's see who's tougher? Your god damned six energy streams or my two streams of energy? Maybe there's even more. Ha-ha, kind of crowded, huh? This is so much fun! Come on, come and get me. Humph, no more, right? There are only six. Did you think I, Monk No Commandment, would be afraid of you puny rascals?" He pressed hard on the two acupoints of Linghu Chong's, and white steam began to come out from the top of his head. At the beginning, he was still able to call out, but soon, as he worked hard to gather more and more inner energy, he had no strength left to make any sound. By then, it was almost time for daybreak, and it was getting brighter and brighter. The white steam on top of his head became thicker and thicker as if a heavy mist had completely surrounded his giant head.

After a long while, he finally drew his hands back and burst into loud laughter. Suddenly, the laughter halted abruptly, and with a heavy thump, Monk No Commandment collapsed down to the ground.

In great astonishment, Yilin cried out, "Dad, Dad!" She dashed by his side to help him up. But Monk No Commandment was simply too heavy, only half way up, the two fell back down to the ground again.

Monk No Commandment' clothes were soaked with sweat. Panting heavily, he still cursed in a trembling voice, "God…God…God damned…God…God…God damned…."

Hearing the curses from him, Yilin relaxed a little. "Dad, what's wrong? Are you exhausted?" she asked.

"Damn it!" Monk No Commandment cussed, "There are six streams of tough energy inside the lad's body, and they wanted to have a fight…fight with me. Damn it! After I gathered up my inner energy, I have already overpowered those six streams of weird energy. Hmm, you can relax now. This lad won't die."

Yilin felt great comfort. She turned around to look, and sure enough, saw Linghu Chong stand up slowly.

"Hey, the monk's inner energy is pretty tough indeed. It only took him minutes to heal brother Linghu's severe wounds," Tian Boguang praised with a smile.

Monk No Commandment was quite pleased to hear the praise. He replied, "You have committed countless crimes. I was thinking of killing you with a simple squeeze, but since you did find the lad Linghu Chong and do deserve a little bit of credit, I am going to spare your life. Now get your ass out of here."

Tian Boguang was furious. He cursed, "What the devil are you talking about, you god damned monk? What kind of garbage is that? You said that if I found Linghu Chong for you within one month, you would release my sealed Death Acupoints and give me the antidote to the poison. Are you going back on your words? If you don't release my acupoints and give me the antidote, then you are no better than a filthy pig, you god damned monk."

These vicious curses didn't anger Monk No Commandment at all. He grinned. "Look at this stinking chap. Look at the coward look on him, afraid that I, Monk No Commandment would go back on my words and not give him the antidote. You dirty skunk, here's the antidote."

He reached into his pocket for the antidote, but because of the great strength he had just spent on Linghu Chong, his hand couldn't help but tremble. The china bottle fell out of his hand multiple times. Yilin reached over and picked up

the bottle, then opened the lid.

"Give him three pills. Take the first pill, and then wait three days before taking another one. After that, wait another six days before taking the third one. But if you get killed during the nine days, don't you blame it on me," Monk No Commandment said.

"Hey monk, you forced me to take poison and now gave me the antidote. I am already being nice by not cursing you. Don't expect me to thank you for that. How about my sealed Death Acupoints?" Tian Boguang asked as he took the antidote from Yilin's hands.

"Those acupoints I sealed had released automatically after seven days. If I had really sealed your Death Acupoint, do you think you would still be standing here alive today?" Monk No Commandment laughed out loud.

Tian Boguang had sensed that those acupoints were already released earlier. Now hearing these words from Monk No Commandment, he finally relaxed.

"God damn it! You lying monk!" he swore with a big smile.

Turning his head to Linghu Chong, he said, "Brother Linghu, I know you must have things to talk to the little Sister. Farewell for now. If all goes well, we'll meet again someday!" He cupped his hand before turning around to follow the main path down the mountain.

"Please wait, brother Tian," Linghu Chong called out.

"Why?" Tian Boguang asked.

"Brother Tian," Linghu Chong said, "thanks for showing me mercy during those several fights. I will make you a friend, but there's one advice I'd like to give you. If you don't listen to me, our friendship won't last long."

"I know what you mean," Tian Boguang grinned. "You want me to stop the kind of trash like raping and stuff. Fine, I'll listen to your advice. There are plenty of sluts and whores around. Although I am fond of women, I don't have to prey on innocent girls or get them killed. Ha-ha, brother Linghu, wasn't it a fantastic scene at the Hengshan Jade House?"

Hearing him mention of the Hengshan Jade House, Linghu Chong and Yilin both flushed. Laughing out loud, Tian Boguang walked away, but after only a couple of steps, his knee gave out all of a sudden. Falling on the ground heavily, he found himself rolling down a small slope. Finally the rolling came to a halt and Tian Boguang managed to sit up after some struggle. Taking out one antidote pill, he swallowed it down his throat, and instantly, severe stomachache consumed him. He sat on the ground and had no extra strength left to even move a muscle. Knowing that this was a normal process to neutralize the kind of strong poison he had, he did not panic at all and just waited patiently for the antidote to take its course.

Earlier when Monk No Commandment pumped the two streams of forceful inner energy into Linghu Chong's body, which effectively repressed the six energy streams from the Peach Valley's Six Fairies, Linghu Chong felt so much better. All the nausea seemed to have gone away and he could feel that he was regaining some of this strength from his legs. Welled with joy, he walked forward and bowed to Monk No Commandment with deep respect.

"Great Master,[13] thank you for saving my life! I am truly grateful!"

"No need to thank me! Ha-ha, we are a big family now. You are my son-in-law and I am your father-in-law. What's there to thank for?" Monk No Commandment let out a big grin.

"Dad, you…you are talking nonsense again." Yilin's face turned completely red.

"Why? Why is that nonsense? You yearned for him days and nights. Don't you want to marry him? Even if you can't marry him, don't you want to make a pretty baby little nun with him?" Monk No Commandment asked in surprise.

"You…you…who wanted…who…?" Yilin spitted in embarrassment.

Sound of footsteps came from the mountain path, and moments later two people showed up. It was Yue Buqun and his daughter Yue Lingshan.

Struck by surprise and joy at the same time, Linghu Chong greeted in a hurry. "Master, little apprentice sister, you are back! Where's Master-Wife?" he called

out.

Noticing that Linghu Chong was much fitter and looked nothing close to the weak look when he had the last gasp the day before, Yue Buqun felt quite happy, but it was not time to ask him yet. Instead, he cupped his hands toward Monk No Commandment.

"May I be enlightened to hear your respectful name, Great Master? What brought you to our shabby residence?" he asked.

"My name is Monk No Commandment. I came to your shabby residence to look for my son-in-law," Monk No Commandment replied and pointed at Linghu Chong. He came from being a butcher and didn't know the kind of polite formula scholars would exchange at greetings. Since Yue Buqun said "shabby residence," he simply copied it.

Yue Buqun had no clue as who this monk was. When he heard the monk say, "I came to look for my son-in-law," he thought that the monk was actually spitting out insults intentionally. Although angered, he kept a calm face and only replied, "Great Master, you must be joking." Seeing that Yilin came forward to salute him, he inquired, "Nephew apprentice Yilin, did your Master send you here to Mount Huashan?"

Yilin flushed slightly as she replied, "No. I…I…"

Yue Buqun paid no more attention to Yilin and turned to Tian Boguang.

"Humph! Tian Boguang, you sure have a lot of guts!"

"I get along with your apprentice Linghu Chong, so I carried two jars of wine up Mount Huashan for a good drink with him. That doesn't take a lot of guts," Tian Boguang replied.

"Where's the wine then?" Yue Buqun's face turned sterner.

"We finished it on top of the 'Cliff of Contemplation' a long time ago."

Yue Buqun turned to Linghu Chong. "Is that true?" he asked.

"Master," Linghu Chong answered, "that was a long story. Please allow me to

explain in details."

"How long has Tian Boguang been on Mount Huashan?"

"About half a month."

"During the half a month, was he on Mount Huashan all the time?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you report to me?" Yue Buqun asked in a stern voice.

"Master and Master-Wife weren't here at the time," Linghu Chong answered.

"Where were we then?"

"You were in Chang-An Town chasing Mister Tian."

Yue Buqun let out a snort. "Mister Tian? Humph, Mister Tian! You knew he committed countless of cruel crimes; why didn't you slay him with your sword? Even if you couldn't beat him, you should have died fighting him, why did you make friends with him in fear for your life?"

"I didn't want to kill him. What could he do? Kill himself with his own sword because he couldn't beat me in a fight?" Tian Boguang interrupted. Still not able to stand up, he remained sitting on the ground.

"What makes you think you are allowed to talk in front of me?" Yue Buqun retorted. He said to Linghu Chong, "Go kill him!"

"Father, big apprentice brother has severe wounds. He shouldn't fight anyone!" Yue Lingshan couldn't help but interrupt.

"Wasn't that evil rapist seriously wounded, just as well? What are you worrying about? I am here. Do you think I will allow that villain to injure my apprentice?" Yue Buqun said.

Yue Buqun knew that Linghu Chong was cunning and crafty, and hated evil as if it were his personal enemy. In addition, Tian Boguang had wounded him just recently, so for sure, he would not make true friends with that evil rapist. Perhaps he resorted to a battle of wits after failing the batter of strength. At the moment, Tian Boguang had been seriously wounded, and probably that would

have attributed to Linghu Chong's effort, already. That was why when he heard that Linghu Chong had made friends with the evil rapist, he wasn't angry for real, and only ordered Linghu Chong to kill the villain. That would not only rid the people of a scourge, but also make a name for a young apprentice. Yue Buqun was sure that at Tian Boguang's current state, even if he could still fight Linghu Chong to a tie, he would stand no chance against even a slight snap attack from Yue himself. But to his surprise, Linghu Chong replied,

"Master, this brother Tian has promised me that he will sincerely mend his ways starting from now on and never harm any innocent woman. I know that he is a man of his word, why don't we…?"

"What…what makes you believe that he is a man of his word? How can one discuss word of honor with such a villain who has committed crimes for which even death cannot atone? How many innocent lives have perished under his murderous knife? What good is it that we martial people practice martial arts if we don't slay this type of evil? Lingshan, hand your sword over to your big apprentice brother," Yue Buqun yelled, in a stern voice.

"Yes!" Yue Lingshan replied. She unsheathed her sword and handed the sword to Linghu Chong, handle first.

Linghu Chong found himself in a very awkward situation. He never dared to go against his Master's orders, but earlier on the verge of death, he had already shaken hands with Tian Boguang and made friends with him. In addition, Tian Boguang had promised to correct his errors and make a fresh start. Although Tian Boguang committed countless crimes before, he was one who would truly keep his words. If Linghu Chong killed him now, it wouldn't feel right. He took the sword from Yue Lingshan and started stumbling toward Tian Boguang. After a dozen steps or so, he pretended that his legs were too weak because of the several wounds of his. Bending his left knee all of a sudden, he threw himself to the ground, and with a thud, the long sword in his hand penetrated his left shin.

No one had expected that to happen, and all cried out in shock. Yilin and Yue Lingshan both dashed toward him, but Yilin halted only after her first step, thinking to herself that how could she, a member of the Buddhist order, show

her care and affection to a young man in public.

"Big apprentice brother, are you alright?" Yue Lingshan rushed by Linghu Chong and cried out.

Linghu Chong did not answer, his eyes shut tight.

Yue Lingshan grabbed hold of the sword handle and gave it a pull. The sword came out as blood gushed out from the wound like a spring. She hurriedly took out some medication of the Huashan School and applied them onto Linghu Chong's wound on his leg. When she looked up by chance, she suddenly noticed the worried pale face of Yilin that was covered by care and concern. Yue Lingshan felt a thump in her heart as she thought to herself, "This little nun surely cares for big apprentice brother very much!"

"Dad, let me slay that evil villain." Yue Lingshan stood up with her sword in hand.

"If you kill that villain, you would stain your reputation for nothing. Give the sword to me!" Yue Buqun directed.

Tian Boguang was such an infamous rapist that his name was well known by many. Yue Buqun worried that when the news spread out later that Miss Yue had killed Tian Boguang, it was destined that some rascals would cook up many stories about how there was an attempted rape, so on and so forth.

Hearing her father's words, Yue Lingshan handed the sword over, but Yue Buqun did not take the sword, instead, he flicked his right sleeve, which wrapped the sword inside.

"No!" Monk No Commandment shouted when he saw the scene. He quickly took off his two shoes and held them in his hands. Yue Buqun swung his arm with a chop stance; the long sword shot toward Tian Boguang, who was in a distance of a hundred feet or so, like a missile. That was well expected by Monk No Commandment. He threw hard with both of his arms; the two shoes also shot out in great speed. The sword was heavy and the shoes were light, plus that the sword was thrown before the two shoes, but somehow the two shoes were able to fly in front of the sword in an arch and circled back. Each shoe hooked

onto one side of the sword handle and actually was able to send the long sword back toward where it was thrown. The sword flew a couple dozens of feet back and then finally lost its momentum and fell to the ground. The sword tip penetrated the soil and kept the sword standing. The two shoes were still hooked on the handle and swayed back and forth.

"That was terrible! Terrible!" Monk No Commandment shouted. "Lin'er, your daddy spent too much inner energy on the son-in-law's internal wounds today. That's why the sword fell only half way through. It should have flown to only two feet from the son-in-law's Master and give him a good scare. Alas, your daddy monk has really lost face this time. This is so embarrassing!"

Throwing a glance at Yue Buqun's unhappy face, Yilin whispered, "Dad, enough." She hurried forward and removed the two shoes off the sword handle. Pulling the sword off the ground, she hesitated. She knew that Linghu Chong didn't want to kill Tian Boguang. If she had given the sword back to Yue Lingshan, and she went to kill Tian Boguang again, wouldn't that break Linghu Chong's heart?

When Yue Buqun swung his arm and shot out the long sword with his sleeve, he thought that for sure the sword would cut through Tian Boguang's heart. Who had expected that Monk No Commandment was actually able to put so much strength onto his two shoes with such a clever maneuver? This monk kept yelling out loud, referring himself as the little nun's father and calling Linghu Chong his son-in-law, full of nonsense. Obviously he was just a mad monk, but his Kung Fu skills are indeed outstanding. Didn't he say that he just spent a good amount of his inner energy to heal Linghu Chong's internal wounds? If it hadn't been so, wouldn't he be even more exceptional? Although he didn't use the Divine Art of Violet Twilight when he flicked with his sleeve, and he was sure he wouldn't lose to the monk if he had actually used it, still, it wouldn't be appropriate for a renowned master to strike again once the first strike had missed. So he cupped his hand and said, "Very admirable! Great Master, since you are determined to take this villain under your wings, it would be inappropriate for me to intervene today. What do you think?"

Hearing him say that he wouldn't kill Tian Boguang today, Yilin held the long sword in both hands and walked in front of Yue Lingshan. Bowing slightly, she said, "Sister, you…."

Yue Lingshan snorted as she grabbed hold of the sword handle. Without even looking, she returned the sword back to its sheath. The shove appeared to be neat and swift.

Monk No Commandment chortled. "Miss, that was a handsome trick!" He turned to Linghu Chong and said, "My little son-in-law, let's go. Your apprentice sister is very pretty. I'd be nervous to leave you and her together."

"Great Master, I know you like to kid around. But remarks like that would damage the reputation of both the Heng-Shan and the Huashan sword schools. Will you please stop that?" Linghu Chong demanded.

"What? When we finally found you and saved your life after so much trouble, now you don't want to marry my daughter?" Monk No Commandment was astonished.

Linghu Chong put on a solemn face. "Linghu Chong dares not ever forget the kindness Great Master has shown by saving my life. Apprentice sister Yilin's Heng-Shen Sword School has very strict school rules. If you keep making such meaningless jokes, it wouldn't look good for the two senior sisters Ding Xian and Ding Yi."

"Lin'er, what…what…what's up with this son-in-law? I…I don't get it!" Monk No Commandment scratched his head hard.

Yilin covered her face with both hands and cried, "Dad, enough! Enough! He does his things and I do my own. Why…why…why mix us together?" Tears burst out from her eyes as she dashed down the mountain path.

Monk No Commandment was even more confused. He dazed for a moment and then muttered, "This is so strange! Before seeing him, she would give up everything to see him, but once she sees him, she didn't want to see him anymore. She is just like her mother. It's simply impossible to understand what a little nun might be thinking." Seeing that his daughter was getting further and

further, he chased after her.

Tian Boguang managed to stand up after some struggle. “The green mountain will always be green and the blue river will continue to flow. I’ll see you around,” he said to Linghu Chong and then turned around and stumbled his way down the mountain path.

Yue Buqun waited till Tian Boguang had gone far before speaking to Linghu Chong again, “Chong, you are treating that evil villain well. You would rather stab yourself than kill him.”

Linghu Chong’s face showed some shame. He knew that Master had seen through his act with his sharp eyes. He lowered his head.

“Master, he did have many bad conducts, but he has promised to mend his ways and do good. He has shown mercy and spared my life multiple times when he had me in his hands.”

“Talking morality with such a brutal and cold-blooded skunk, sooner or later, you will have to pay for it,” Yue Buqun sneered. He had always favored this Head Apprentice of his. Seeing that he had survived such severe wounds had already brought him great joy. When Linghu Chong pretended to fall and stabbed himself in the leg, he knew very well that it was an act, but he also knew too well that Linghu Chong had always been crafty since he was only a child, so he decided not to investigate further. Besides, Linghu Chong’s words to Monk No Commandment were very effective and appropriate, just the way he wanted it, therefore, he chose to set the case of Tian Boguang aside temporarily.

“Where’s the booklet?” Yue Buqun stuck out his hand.

Linghu Chong had guessed that Master and little apprentice sister must have come back because the “crime” was discovered and the “criminal” identified, that was why Master came back to Mount Huashan after the book. And that was exactly what he had wished for.

“Sixth apprentice brother has it. Little apprentice sister only did it to save my life. Her intention was all good. Master, please don’t blame her. Without Master’s permission, I would never dare to even touch the manuscript, not

mentioning reading about any formula or technique off the booklet," Linghu Chong swore.

Yue Buqun's face immediately turned into a smile, kind and pleasant. "You did it right. It's not that I don't want to pass it on to you, but since our school is facing some serious events at the time and I could not spare any moment to give you detailed instructions. If I just let you study by yourself, I am afraid that you might go the wrong way, and that would lead to unpredictable trouble." He paused for a while and then continued, "That Monk No Commandment acted like a lunatic, but he does have brilliant inner energy techniques. Did he dissolve those six unorthodox energy streams inside you? How do you feel right now?"

"I don't feel nauseated any more, and all the burning pain and freezing pain are gone too. But it feels like I've run all my strength out," Linghu Chong answered.

"You have just recovered from severe internal injuries. It's natural that you feel weak. We have to repay Great Master No Commandment for saving your life one day," Yue Buqun said.

"Yes, Master!"

Ever since Yue Buqun came back to Mount Huashan, he worried that they might meet the Peach Valley's Six Fairies again. But so far he had seen no trace of them, which relaxed him a bit. But he still didn't want to stay long.

"Let's meet with Dayou and then go to Mount Songshan together. Chong, do you think you are fit to make a long journey?" he asked.

"Yes, I am. Yes!" Linghu Chong replied with sheer joy.

Soon, the Master and the two apprentices arrived at the little hut next to the "House of Integrity." Yue Lingshan rushed forward with a trot and entered the hut after pushing the door open. Suddenly, she started screaming, her voice filled with terror. Yue Buqun and Linghu Chong both dashed forward to look inside, and they saw Lu Dayou lying on the floor, motionless.

"Little apprentice sister, don't be frightened, I sealed his acupoints earlier,"

Linghu Chong explained with a smile.

"You sure scared the wits out of me. Why did you seal his acupoints?" Yue Lingshan asked.

"Since I refused to read the manuscript, for my good, he decided to read the scripts in the manuscript for me to listen," Linghu Chong explained. "I couldn't convince him, so I had to seal his acupoints. How come…?"

Suddenly, Yue Buqun uttered a cry of surprise. He bent down to check on Lu Dayou's breathing and also checked his pulses before speaking in shock, "How come…how come he is dead? Chong, which acupoint did you seal?"

Hearing the sudden news that Lu Dayou was dead, Linghu Chong was scared out of his wits. His body started shaking and he almost fainted. "I…I…." he muttered in a trembling voice as he reached out to touch Lu Dayou's face. The face was chilling cold. Apparently Lu Dayou died a long while back. Tears burst out from his eyes. "Sixth…sixth apprentice brother, are you really gone?" he cried.

"Where's the booklet?" Yue Buqun asked.

Linghu Chong looked with his teary eyes, and in the blur, he didn't see the "Violet Twilight Manuscript" either. "Where's the booklet?" he couldn't help but ask himself. He checked Lu Dayou's pockets in a hurry, but there's no trace of the manuscript. "When I sealed his acupoint, I remember seeing the manuscript turned open on the desk. How come it's not there anymore?"

Yue Lingshan looked all over the room, on the bed, next to the desk, behind the door, and under the chairs, but still, there was no trace of the "Violet Twilight Manuscript" whatsoever.

This manuscript was the ultimate Kung Fu manuscript of the Huashan Sword School. Now when it suddenly disappeared, Yue Buqun was utterly apprehensive. He examined the corpse of Lu Dayou carefully but found no fatal wound. He examined around the little hut, including the top of the roof, but found no traces left by any outsiders.

“If no outsiders had come, then it couldn’t have been the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies or the Monk No Commandment who took it,” Yue Buqun thought inwardly. He asked Linghu Chong with a stern voice, “Chong, which acupoint did you seal?”

Linghu Chong knelt down in front of his Master. “I was afraid that I did not have much strength with my fingers, that’s why I sealed the vital acupoint Tan-Zhong Acupoint. I had no clue…no clue that it would have killed sixth apprentice brother accidentally.” He extended his arm and drew the long sword by Lu Dayou’s waist quickly, and without hesitation, slashed it toward his own neck.

Yue Buqun flicked his finger, which sent the long sword flying far. “Even if you want to die, you’ll have to find the Violet Twilight Manuscript first. Where on earth did you hide the manuscript?”

Linghu Chong felt a chill in his heart. He thought to himself, “Master is actually suspecting that I hid the Violet Twilight Manuscript.” He dazed for a moment and then spoke again, “Master, someone must have stolen the manuscript. I will chase it back at all cost and return it to you, Master, not even leaving one page behind.”

“If someone makes a copy or memorizes the entire thing, then even if we get the manuscript back, intact, the high level Kung Fu of our Huashan School would no longer be the ultimately unique technique.” Yue Buqun’s mind was as confused as a tangled skein. After a short pause, he said to Linghu Chong with a gentle tone, “Chong, if you took the manuscript, as long as you give it back, I won’t blame you.”

Staring at the corpse of Lu Dayou blankly, Linghu Chong said loudly, “Master, I swear with all my heart. If there are people who peeped at the ‘Violet Twilight Manuscript,’ then I will kill all of them. If there are ten of them, I will kill all ten, and if there are a hundred of them, I will kill all one hundred. If Master still thinks that it was I who stole it, please kill me now. I have no complaints.”

“Get up. You said it wasn’t you, then I believe you.” Yue Buqun shook his

head. “You are very good friends with Dayou, of course you would never kill him intentionally. Then who on earth stole the manuscript?” He stared outside of the window blankly, lost in thought.

“Father, it’s all my fault. I…I thought I did a great thing by stealing Father’s manuscript. Who would have thought that big apprentice brother would refuse to read it and sixth apprentice brother would lose his life because of it. I…I will find the manuscript back no matter what,” Yue Lingshan exclaimed in a sobbing voice.

“Let’s look around one more time,” Yue Buqun said.

The three searched every bit of space in the small hut this time, but not only didn’t they find the manuscript, nor could they find any trace or clue.

“We should not spread the news. I will tell your mother about it, and other than that, don’t mention this to anybody else. Let’s bury Dayou and then head down the mountain,” Yue Buqun said to his daughter.

Looking at the face of Lu Dayou’s dead body, Linghu Chong couldn’t help feeling sad. He thought to himself, “Among all the apprentice brothers, sixth apprentice brother was the best friend of all. But I was actually the one who killed him by accident. I had never seen that coming at all. Even if I weren’t wounded, such a poke wouldn’t have gotten him killed. Could it be that because I had the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies’ unorthodox energy inside me, therefore the strength of the poke was somehow different? Even if that were true, why did the Violet Twilight Manuscript disappear all of a sudden? Alas, I really can’t figure this out. Master is suspecting me of stealing the manuscript. It’s useless to plead my innocence. I must find out the truth about this no matter what I have to do. By then, I can cut my own throat to apologize to sixth apprentice brother.”

Wiping off his tears with his sleeve, Linghu Chong found a hoe and worked on digging a grave to bury Lu Dayou’s corpse. Sweat streamed down all over his body as he dug with all his strength while panting heavily. Only with the help of Yue Lingshan by the side, he was able to finish building the grave.

Some time later, the trio arrived at the White-Horse Temple. Seeing that

Linghu Chong had escaped death and had come back together, Madam Yue felt unspeakable joy. After Yue Buqun told her on the quiet about Lu Dayou's death and the disappearance of the Violet Twilight Manuscript, Madam Yue shed more tears of grievance. Although it was an important matter that the Violet Twilight Manuscript got lost, in her mind, since her husband had mastered the Kung Fu, it didn't matter if he still had the manuscript or not. But Lu Dayou had been an apprentice in the Huashan Sword School for many years, and he was genuinely a friendly and good fellow, so of course it was very sad to learn about his tragic death. The many apprentices had no clue, so after seeing the gloomy look on Master, Master-Wife, big apprentice brother, and little apprentice sister's faces, none dared to make any loud noise.

Yue Buqun ordered Lau Denuo to hire two wagons, one for Madam Yue and Yue Lingshan, the other for Linghu Chong to rest in, and the group resumed the trip east toward Mount Songshan.

On no particulate day, they arrived at the town of Weilin. It was close to dust already. There was only one inn in the entire town, and it was already full. Since there were quite a few females in the Huashan group, it was too troublesome to stay overnight at any local residence.

"Let's keep going. We should be able to find lodging in the next town," Yue Buqun told everyone.

But only one mile into the trip, the wagon Madam Yue sat in broke down with a broken axle. Having no other choice, Madam Yue and Yue Lingshan had to travel on foot.

"Master, there's a monastery in the woods over there. Do you think it would be a good idea if we spend the night there?" Shi Daizi pointed at the northeast and suggested.

"But we have females and they might feel it's troublesome," Madam Yue said.

"Daizi, why don't you go make an inquiry. If the monks in the monastery decline, then we won't, no pressure for them," Yue Buqun instructed.

Shi Daizi nodded and then dashed away. Only moments later, he had run back

while shouting in a distance, “Master, it’s a discarded monastery. There’s no monk there.”

Everyone was quite glad to hear that. Tao Jun, Ying Luobai, and Shu Qi the bunch of younger apprentices ran over ahead of the rest of the people.

By the time Yue Buqun, Madam Yue, and the rest of the group arrived outside of the monastery, dark clouds had piled up the eastern side of the sky, and only moments later, the entire sky had turned dark.

“It’s very fortunate that there’s a discarded monastery here, or we would have found ourselves in the middle of a storm half way,” Madam Yue said.

They entered the big hall and found a statue of a blue-faced Buddha. The statue depicted a man holding herb grass with a cape made of leaves on his shoulders. It was the Buddha of the Herb, Shen-Nong, who, as legend said, tasted hundreds of herbs, himself, to test their medical effects. All the apprentices, led by Yue Buqun, saluted the Buddha to show their respect. Afterwards, they began to settle down, but before they even opened their bedding rolls, several lightning bolts flashed, and thunder exploded. Before long, pea sized raindrops started pouring down, splashing on the tiles on the roof.

The small monastery had leaks everywhere. Everyone decided to not even open his or her bedding rolls and simply found a dry spot to sit down. Gao Gengming, Liang Fa, and three other female apprentices went to prepare dinner.

“This year’s spring season thunders are too early. It’s probably going to be a year with poor harvest,” Madam Yue said.

Linghu Chong sat in a corner of the hall leaning on the rack of the big bell. Rain streamed down the eave’s gutter like a curtain made of water. He stared at it as he thought to himself, “It would be a lot more enjoyable if sixth apprentice brother were still alive and could chat and joke with us.” During the journey, he rarely spoke to Yue Lingshan. Especially when he saw her and Lin Pingzhi were together sometimes, he would intentionally avoid them and walk far away. He kept telling himself, “Little apprentice sister stole Violet Twilight Manuscript for

me to heal my wounds, fully knowing that Master would reproach her severely. It is obvious that she cared for me very much. I only wish that she would always be happy throughout her life. Since I am determined to commit suicide to apologize to sixth apprentice brother after I find the manuscript, why would I ever provoke her again? Little apprentice sister and apprentice brother Lin are a perfect pair of lovers. I hope she will forget all about me, so after I die, she won't have to shed any tears." Even though he thought so in his head, every time he saw her and Lin Pingzhi walking abreast chatting joyously, he simply couldn't help feeling sorrow and pain in his heart. At the moment, it was raining cats and dogs outside the monastery; he watched Yue Lingshan walking about the hall, helping with preparing the meal. Each time when her eyes met Lin Pingzhi's, both would let a slight smile flash across their faces. The two of them probably thought that nobody would notice it, but not even one of the smiles escaped Linghu Chong's eyes. Each smile would depress Linghu Chong some more. He wanted to turn his head away, but each time when Yue Lingshan walked by, he simply couldn't resist the desire to cast a glance toward her.

After dinner, everyone went to sleep. The rain kept coming down, heavy for a while, then light for another, but never ended. Linghu Chong had many things on his mind and they kept him from falling asleep. Sounds of breathing and snorting rose one after another. Everyone else had fallen asleep.

Sounds of hoof beats suddenly rose from the southeast. There were over ten of them and they came closer and closer along the main road.

"Why are they traveling in such a hurry in the middle of the rainy night? Could it possibly be that they are after us?" Linghu Chong's heart skipped a beat. He sat up and then heard Yue Buqun speak to everyone in a loud voice.

"Everyone stay quiet."

Moments later, the pack of horsemen cruised by the monastery. By then everyone of Huashan Sword School were awake and each had his hand next to his sword handle. Hearing that the sound of hoof beats passed by the monastery and went further and further, all let out a breath of relief and were just about ready to go back to sleep, when the sound of the hoof beats rose again.

Apparently these riders had turned around and came back. All the horses stopped right outside of the monastery.

"Is Mr. Yue from the Huashan Sword School inside the monastery? We have a question to ask him," a voice shouted, loud and clear.

Linghu Chong was the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, and it had always been him who stepped forward to handle things. So he walked to the entrance of the monastery, took off the door bolt, and then opened the gate.

"Friends, who are you? Why have you come late at night?" he asked as he looked outside.

There were a total of fifteen riders. They formed an arch and surrounded the gate. About six or seven of them had waterproof lanterns in their hands, and they all pointed their lanterns at Linghu Chong's face.

In the dark night, when six or seven lanterns all pointed at one's face, then inevitably, one would end up with blurry eyes. Just this one action had shown that the uninvited visitors were full of hostility. Linghu Chong opened his eyes as wide as he could but only found out that each of the fifteen riders had a black hood over his head, leaving only two holes showing his eyes. Linghu Chong suddenly realized, "Either we know these people, or they are afraid that we would remember their faces."

"Please have Yue Buqun, Mr. Yue, come out to see us," a rider on the left said.

"Who are you? May I have the honor to learn your name please, so I can pass it on to my Master?" Linghu Chong inquired.

"You can save yourself some trouble by stop asking for our names. You can go tell your Master this: We heard that the Huashan Sword School got hold of the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript of the Fortune Prestige Escort House, so we just wanted to borrow it to take a look," the man responded.

Linghu Chong felt his anger starting to grow. "The Huashan Sword School has its own set of Kung Fu techniques. Why would we want other's Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript? We don't have it. Even if we did have it, are you just going

to take it with force? How dare you belittle the Huashan Sword School?"

The man burst into loud laughter. The rest of the fourteen riders also began to laugh out loud. The sound of their deafening laughter swept across the deserted plain like a storm. Obviously each and every one of them had first-class inner strength.

"We've encountered tough enemy again," shocked inwardly, Linghu Chong thought to himself. "It seemed that all fifteen of them are elite fighters. I wonder who they really are."

Amid the loud laughter, a man spoke, "We heard that the chap Lin from the Fortune Prestige Escort House has joined the Huashan Sword School. We've always heard that Gentleman Sword Mr. Yue of the Huashan Sword School had superb mastery of sword arts. Then of course he would feel beneath his dignity to pay any attention to it. We are just a bunch of nobodies in the Martial World. Today we make bold to ask Mr. Yue to grant his permission and loan the book so we can have a look."

The fourteen others' laughter kept going like tides after tides, but this speaker's voice still sounded loud and clear, standing out clearly from all the other noises. Apparently, this one's inner strength was even stronger compared to the others.

"Who are you, really? You…." Linghu Chong said. But he couldn't even hear his own words. Astounded, he stopped talking and thought to himself, "Could I have lost all my inner energy built up during the past over a dozen years? Can there have not a single bit of it left?"

After Linghu Chong left Mount Huashan, he had tried several times to work on his Qi-Gong exercises using the formula and techniques from his own school, but as soon as he started to gather his inner strength, his breathing would lose its rhythm and various uncontrollable energy would start flowing randomly through his body. And as soon as he tried to direct the flow, nausea and dizziness would follow. It would turn so bad that if he didn't stop the breathing exercise, he would have simply passed out. He tried several times

more and always ended up with the same result. When he asked for advice from his Master about it, Yue Buqun only cast a cold glance at him and didn't answer. At the time Linghu Chong thought to himself, "Master must have suspected that I embezzled the Violet Twilight Manuscript and was practicing the techniques behind his back. There really is no need to plead innocence. After all, I won't be alive for long; why should I trouble myself with these inner strength problems?" After that incident, he stopped exercising completely. Who would have thought that when he tried to gather his strength and speak loudly, his voice would be completely buried by the enemy's laughter?

Yue Buqun's voice rose from inside the monastery, loud and clear, "All of you are renowned masters in the Martial World. Why have you been so modest and called yourself a bunch of nobodies? Yue Buqun never tells a lie. We really don't have the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript of the Lin Family."

He used the Divine Art of the Violet Twilight when he spoke. Although his voice was mixed with the loud laughter from all the people outside of the monastery, everyone, both inside the monastery and outside of the monastery, could hear every word loud and clear. He had spoken in a very relaxed manner, no different from any ordinary conversation. It sounded a lot more natural than the way the previous man had spoke – yelling with immense strength.

"You say you don't have it. Then where the hell is it?" Another man retorted in a croaky voice.

"What makes you think that you are worthy of the answer?" Yue Buqun mocked.

"Anyone in this world is worthy of an answer for things happening in this world," the man replied.

Yue Buqun sneered, but did not respond.

"Hey, Yue Buqun, are you going to give it up or not? Don't you refuse a toast only to drink a forfeit! If you don't give it up yourself, we'll have no choice but to resort to force and go in to search ourselves," that man yelled out loud.

"All female apprentices stay together, back to back, and all male apprentices,

unsheathe your swords!" Madam Yue told everyone in a whisper.

Rustling sounds echoed as everyone inside the monastery drew their long swords. Linghu Chong stood by the gate and reached for his long sword, but before he had enough time to draw his sword, two men had leapt off their horses and sprang at him. Linghu Chong dodged to the side and was just about to draw his sword when he heard someone yell, "Get lost!" Then the man raised his leg and kicked Linghu Chong hard, sending him flying in the air. Linghu Chong flew tens of feet before landing hard in a bush. He found himself in a state of complete confusion.

"His kick wasn't all that powerful, how come I don't have any strength with my lower body and my legs feel so light?" he thought.

He struggled to sit up, but all of a sudden, he felt as if the blood between his stomach and his chest were boiling hot while seven or eight streams of energy circled and twisted inside him, clashing and smashing against each other. He couldn't even move a little finger of his. Linghu Chong was dumbfounded. He opened his mouth wide to scream, but nothing came out of it. It was almost as if he was under some kind of evil spell. His brain still worked perfectly, but he had become completely frozen, not able to move a single muscle. Sound of weapons clashing into each other echoed in his ears nonstop. Master, Master-Wife, and second apprentice brother dashed out of the monastery and engaged in fights with seven or eight masked enemies. Several other masked men charged into the monastery. Shouts and yells came out through the gate mixed with girls' rebukes. The rain started to get heavier. Several waterproof lanterns were scattered around on the ground. The dim yellowish light flickered as reflections from blades flashed and shadows in all shapes swayed back and forth.

A short while passed when suddenly, a shriek from a female echoed inside the monastery. Linghu Chong became more worried. The enemy consisted of all men. Then of course the shriek must have been coming from an injured apprentice sister. He watched the fights outside of the monastery. Master was busy waving his sword fighting against four enemies. Master-Wife was also engaged in a fight with two enemies. He knew that both his Master and Master-

Wife had brilliant sword skills. Even though they were both fighting against more than one opponent, chances were that they would still be able to hold them off. Yelling at the top of his tongue, second apprentice brother Lao Denuo was also fighting against two opponents. Both opponents used long knives. From the weapon colliding sounds Linghu Chong could tell that both of them had very strong arms. He knew that if the fight lasted longer, Lao Denuo would eventually have no chance of withstanding their powerful attacks. Seeing how fierce the fights outside of the monastery were with three on his side against eight enemies, he could easily imagine how vicious the fights would be inside. There were a good number of apprentice brothers and sisters inside the monastery, but none of them were elite fighters. Screams and cries rose one after another. Perhaps several people had been slain. The more worried he became, the harder it was to gather any strength. He could only pray inwardly.

"Dear Heaven! Please let me gain my strength back for just one hour. If I can get back in the monastery, I will be able to protect the little apprentice sister. Even if the enemy slice me into ten thousand pieces or bestow upon me every kind of torturing, I would be most willing to."

He struggled some more and tried to work up his inner energy, but suddenly six streams of energy flow lashed at his chest all together, and then two streams of energy flow smashed down from above and pushed the six streams of energy back down. Linghu Chong felt ultimate emptiness as if all of his organs had disappeared and all his blood and skin were also completely gone. A shiver ran through his heart as he cried inwardly, "Good Heavens! So that's how it is!"

By then he finally understood. When the Peach Valley's Six Fairies tried to heal his wounds using their inner energy, they forced six streams of inner energy into his body through different channels and passages. That didn't do his internal wounds any good, and in addition, the six energy streams stayed inside him and caused even more problems. Then it just happened that he met Monk No Commandment with excellent inner strength, but also an utterly impetuous temper, that forced another two streams of energy flow inside of him and overwhelmed the six streams of energy from the Peach Valley's Six Fairies. For

a short while, it looked as if his internal wounds were all healed, but the truth was that he had two more energy streams in his body, which created a resistance against the existing energy streams inside of him, and his own inner energy from years of Qi-Gong exercises had all perished as an end result. He had been rendered into an ordinary person who had never been trained with any martial arts.

A pain came from his heart as he thought to himself, “What a misfortune! This is as if all my martial art skills were taken away from me. At the moment when my school is in trouble, I couldn’t even help it in anyway. I am the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, yet all I can do is to lie here on the ground and watch my Master and Master-Wife getting harassed and my apprentice brothers and sisters getting slaughtered. What a big loser am I! Fine, I’ll just go die by little apprentice sister’s side.”

He knew that if he even attempted to gather some inner energy, which would trigger the eight streams of energy inside him, he would end up frozen like a dead meat, so he let all inner strength flow back into his central stomach naturally and didn’t try to gather any inner strength, and sure enough, he gained control of his four limbs. He stood up slowly, drew his sword in slow motion, and then moved toward the monastery in small steps.

As soon as he entered the gate, a smell of blood immediately assailed him. Two lanterns sat on the altar and lit the hall. Liang Fa, Shi Daizi, Gao Gengming, and a bunch of other apprentice brothers were still fighting a bloody battle. Several apprentice brothers and sister lay on the ground. It was hard to tell if they were still breathing. Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi were in the middle of a battle abreast against a masked enemy.

Yue Lingshan’s long hair scattered about, and Lin Pingzhi was holding his sword in his left hand; obviously his right hand got injured in the battle. The masked man had a short spear in his hand and demonstrated excellent skills with his spear techniques. Lin Pingzhi had to use the move called Green Pines Welcoming Guests three times in a roll to parry off his fierce attacks. But the sword moves he had learned were too limited. The masked man gave his short

spear a sudden shake. The red tassels on the spear spread open and blinded Lin Pingzhi's view. With a thump, the spear stabbed into Lin Pingzhi's right shoulder. Yue Lingshan launched two thrusts frantically and forced the enemy to take a step back.

"Little Lin, go wrap up your wound. Hurry!" she shouted.

"It's no problem!" Lin Pingzhi responded as he lunged with a thrust, but his feet were already tumbling underneath him.

The masked man let out a long laugh when he swung the spear and struck Yue Lingshan in the waist with the spear handle. Yue Lingshan dropped the sword in her right hand and squatted down in pain.

Linghu Chong was shocked. He dashed forward and thrust his sword forward. But the sword only went forward for about one foot before all the energy streams inside him clashed again. Instantly, his right arm gave out and dropped down. The masked man saw the sword coming toward him and had planned to dodge to the side and then return the attack with his spear, but after only one foot into the thrust, the attacker's arm had dropped down. He was a bit confused. Without thinking much, he swept his left leg and kicked Linghu Chong all the way out of the gate. "Splash!" Linghu Chong fell into a puddle of water outside of the monastery. The rain was still pouring down nonstop. Linghu Chong found himself unable to move with mud inside his mouth, eyes, nose, and ears.

Lao Denuo was just taken down, with his acupoints sealed by the enemy. His two opponents now joined the other six to attack the Yue couple. Moments later, another two enemies ran out of the monastery and joined the group. Yue Buqun was now against seven and Madam Yue against three.

Suddenly, both Madam Yue and one of her opponents cried out. Both had inflicted wounds on their legs. The injured man retreated back. Madam Yue had one less opponent now. But since she had just taken a heavy chop on the leg, with such a severe wound, her strength began to fade away. After exchanging some more blows, she took a hit on the shoulder from the back of the enemy's

knife. That was it. She collapsed to the ground. The two masked men burst into loud laughter as they sealed several acupoints on Madam Yue's back.

By then, the apprentices inside the monastery had all been wounded and taken down one after another. The enemies obviously had a plot. They only knocked the Huashan apprentices down or sealed their acupoints but didn't kill any one of them. The fifteen masked men surrounded Yue Buqun in a circle. Eight of them took on eight different directions to attack Yue Buqun simultaneously, and the remaining seven each held a waterproof lantern and aimed the light directly at Yue Buqun's eyes.

The Head Master of the Huashan Sword School had superb inner strength and brilliant sword skills, but the eight attackers were all elite fighters as well. In addition, the seven lanterns pointing directly at him made it very hard for him to look straight ahead. Yue Buqun knew too well that the Huashan Sword School had suffered a crushing defeat, and the entire body of the school would inevitably perish in the monastery, but he still put on a good defense by blocking all his vital parts with a shield of blade. He had resourceful inner energy and effective sword art techniques. When the lanterns were directed at him, he simply looked down. For a good while, the eight attackers made no progress whatsoever.

"Yue Buqun, are you going to surrender or not?" one of the masked men yelled at him.

"I would rather die than submit. Kill me if you want," Yue Buqun replied.

"If you don't surrender, I'll cut off your wife's right arm to start with!" the man threatened. He raised his large saber high and aimed it at Madam Yue's shoulder. The saber had a very thick back and a razor sharp blade. Reflecting the light from the lanterns, the blade shined with dark bluish flare.

"How can I just let him cut off junior apprentice sister's arm?" Yue Buqun hesitated. But then he thought, "If I threw down my sword and surrender, undoubtedly I would suffer humiliation all the same. How can I let the hundreds of years of eminence of the Huashan Sword School get ruined in my hands?"

He took a deep breath, and suddenly his face shined in violet color as he swung his sword at the man on his left. The man raised his knife to parry it, but Yue Buqun had attached his Divine Art of the Violet Twilight with the chop; the sword carried a tremendous amount of power. The knife was knocked back. Both the sword and the knife cut into the man's right arm simultaneously and chopped two sections off his right arm. Blood splashed everywhere. The man uttered a loud cry and fell to the ground.

Succeeding with the first move Yue Buqun thrust his sword down swiftly. This time the sword penetrated another enemy's left leg. That man poured out a stream of curses and retreated.

Now there were two less opponents in the battle, but the situation wasn't any better. A heavy thump broke out as a meteor hammer smashed into Yue Buqun's back. He had to lunge three quick thrusts to drive the enemies back. Barely catching his breath, he couldn't help but spit out a mouthful of blood. All the enemies cheered.

"Old folk Yue is wounded. Wear him out!"

The six attackers could almost smell their victory, so they all took a step back and made the circle a bit bigger. Now Yue Buqun didn't have any chance of a surprise attack.

There are a total of fifteen masked enemies, three of which had been wounded by the Yue couple. Among the three wounded, one had a serious injury – his arm was cut off. The other two only had injuries on their legs, nothing too serious, and each held a waterproof lantern and kept swearing at Yue Buqun wildly.

From their accents, Yue Buqun could tell that they came from different regions. The Kung Fu skills they demonstrated also consisted of many different styles. Obviously they weren't apprentices from the same school. But during the fight, they had good understanding of each other and attacked with precision and synchronization. It didn't seem that they had just ganged up together recently. Where on earth were they from? He pondered but couldn't find an

answer. And the most unusual part of this whole thing was that since all fifteen of them had elite fighting skills, as one with a good deal of knowledge of the Martial World, he shouldn't have failed to recognize at least some of them, yet he had no clue whatsoever. He was sure that none of these enemies had ever engaged in a fight with him before or had grudges against him. Could it be true that they came to give trouble to the Huashan Sword School because they were really after the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript?

He pondered and pondered, yet never slowing down with his hands. He used the Divine Art of the Violet Twilight to its extreme, and the tip of his sword shined dimly. After exchanging over another dozen moves, another enemy got stabbed in the shoulder and had to drop his iron staff. One of the enemies standing outside of the attacking circle sprang forward and took over the attacking position. This man held a knife with a saw shaped blade. The knife looked very heavy, and close to the tip of the knife, the blade curved into the shape of a hook. The man tried again and again to lock Yue's sword with the hook. But Yue Buqun had plenty of inner strength. It seemed as if the longer the fight lasted, the more energetic he appeared to be. Suddenly he struck a back palm, which landed squarely on one enemy's chest and broke the man's two ribs. The steel cane in the man's hands was also knocked down by the shock. But the man turned out to be extremely ferocious. The great pain from his broken ribs provoked his fury. He dived down and had Yue Buqun's left leg in his arms. Astounded, Yue Buqun swung his sword and chopped down at the man's back, but two knifes reached forward simultaneously and blocked the chop. Not able to chop down using his long sword, Yue Buqun kicked toward the enemy's head with his right foot. That man was an expert in grappling. Reaching out with his right arm, he hooked Yue Buqun's right leg as well. Then he rolled forward. Although Yue Buqun had excellent Kung Fu skills, he could no longer keep his balance and fell down on the ground. Instantly, knife, short spear, meteor hammer, long sword, and other various weapons all aimed right at his vital parts such as head, face, throat, and chest. Yue Buqun heaved a deep sigh and let go of his sword. Closing his eyes in despair, he waited for the deathblow. Then he felt some heavy blows to his waist, rib cage, throat, and

chest. The enemy had sealed several of his acupoints with heavy jabs.

Two masked men propped him up as an old voice spoke out, “Gentleman Sword Mr. Yue certainly has brilliant Kung Fu skills. You have a well-deserved reputation. We ganged up on you, fifteen against one, yet were only able to subdue you after getting four or five of us wounded. Hmm, that is very admirable! If I had to fight you one on one, I am sure I would lose to you. But when you look at it a different way, we have fifteen, but you have over twenty people. Your Huashan Sword School still has more bodies and better odds here. Tonight we won the battle with few against many and completely defeated the Huashan Sword School. I have to say that the victory didn’t come easy. What do you guys think?”

“Most definitely! It wasn’t an easy victory for sure!” The rest of the masked men agreed in unison.

“Mr. Yue,” the old man continued, “we really have no grudge against you. We made bold and offended you only because we want to borrow the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript and check it out. This manuscript didn’t belong to your Huashan Sword School before. When you used all your ingenuity and managed to take in Lin Family’s young boy from the Fortune Prestige Escort House as your apprentice, it was obvious that you were really after that sword manuscript. What you did is truly sneaky. When fellow martial friends heard about this, all were quite mad at you. I am giving you a valuable advice here. Why don’t you give it up?”

Yue Buqun was infuriated. “Humph, I am already in your hands. Go ahead and give me a quick end. Why waste your time with rubbish? Everyone in the Martial World knows my reputation. You can easily kill me, but if you want to ruin my reputation, humph! Dream on!”

“What’s so difficult about ruining your reputation?” a man in a mask said with loud laughter. “Your wife, daughter, and those female apprentices do not look bad at all. Why don’t we divide them up and make them our bitches? Ha-ha, Mr. Yue, you are going to be very famous in the Martial World indeed!”

The rest of the masked men all laughed out loud. The laughter was filled with evil. Yue Buqun trembled with rage.

Several men in mask pushed the bunch of male and female apprentices out of the monastery. All of them had their acupoints sealed. Some had blood all over their faces and some fell down immediately after they came out – obviously they had wounds on their legs or feet.

"Mr. Yue," the old man with a mask spoke again, "you probably have somewhat figured out where we are from. We are no heroes from the righteous schools. There is really no restriction limiting what we can do or cannot do. Some of my buddies here are really fond of women. I am sure it wouldn't look too good for you if some of them offended your respectful wife and daughter."

"Fine! Fine! If you don't believe me, go ahead and search us. See for yourself whether we have the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript or not," Yue Buqun croaked.

"I'd suggest you give it out yourself. Once we start searching one by one and get to your woman and your daughter, it's not going to be a pleasant scene," a man behind a mask said with an evil grin.

"All the trouble started because of me, Lin Pingzhi," Lin Pingzhi barked. "Listen up! Our Lin Family in Fujian didn't have any Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript at all! It's up to you to believe it or not." He picked up a steel cane from the ground and smacked it toward his own forehead. But since his acupoints on his arms were sealed, the smack was so weak that even though the cane hit his head, it only left a scratch on his skin with no blood coming out of it. But everyone understood his intention. He had intended to sacrifice his own life to prove that there wasn't any sword manuscript that the Huashan Sword School ever got hold of.

"Young Master Lin, you are quite heroic." The old man with a mask grinned. "We are friends of your deceased father. Yue Buqun murdered your father and took possession of your family's Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript, that's why we are here to defend the victim against injustice. Your Master has a mere name

of a gentleman, but not the reality of a gentleman. I think it would be better if you submit to me as your Master. I guarantee you that you will learn first-class Kung Fu that will enable you to sweep about in the Martial World at will."

"My parents were murdered by Yu Canghai from the Qingcheng Sword School and Mu Gaofeng. What does it have anything to do with my Master? I am a proud apprentice of the Huashan Sword School. Did you expect me to incline to life instead of braving death in dangers like this?" Lin Pingzhi snarled.

"That's right! Our Huashan Sword School…." Liang Fa also snarled.

"What about your Huashan Sword School?" a masked man yelled as he swung his knife forward and chopped Liang Fa's head off. Blood gushed out like a fountain. Several Huashan apprentices screamed in terror.

Many thoughts tangled in Yue Buqun's mind, but he still couldn't figure out where these men had come from. According to what the old man had just said, perhaps they were bandits from the unorthodox side. Or maybe they were key figures of an evil clan. However, even if he didn't know some of the renowned masters in the region, either on the orthodox side or the unorthodox side, he would have at least heard about them. There was no clan or gang that had so many elite fighters. That man chopped off Liang Fa's head with no hesitation. The cruelty he put on display was exceptionally rare. When people engage in fights in the Martial World, it was usual that people got hurt or killed. But once one side took the other side prisoner, it was very seldom that one would cut someone's head off so carelessly.

After killing Liang Fa with a casual chop, the man laughed wildly and walked next to Madam Yue. He chopped the bloodstained knife a couple of times in the air. The blade swished by Madam Yue's head with a mere half foot.

"Don't…don't hurt my mother!" Yue Lingshan screamed before losing her consciousness.

Madam Yue was a brave woman and showed no fear. She actually wished that the man would kill her with a chop, thus avoiding any possible humiliation from them. So she snarled at him, "You damn coward. Go ahead and kill me if you've

got any guts."

Sound of hoof beats suddenly rose from the northeast corner. Dozens of horses galloped in their direction.

"Who are they? Go check them out?" the old man in the mask yelled.

"Got it!" two men in masks responded as they jumped on their horsebacks and dashed out

The sound of hoof beats came closer and closer, and then came the sounds of weapons clashing into each other. "Ouch!" someone cried out. Apparently the two masked men had gotten into a battle with the people coming and someone just got wounded.

The Yue Buqun couple and all the Huashan apprentices were overwhelmed in joy, knowing that the cavalry had arrived. In the dim light from the lanterns, they watched the forty or so riders gallop along the main road. Mud splashed high as the group approached them. Moments later, the riders arrived and reined in their horses outside the monastery. A man on horseback shouted.

"Oh, these are friends from the Huashan Sword School. Hey, isn't that brother Yue?"

Yue Buqun looked following the origin of the voice. When his eyes stopped at the man's face, he felt greatly embarrassed. The man was none other than the one who took the Five Mountains Command Flag up to Mount Huashan only several days ago, the Third Guardian of Songshan – Crane Hands Lu Bai. The man on his right was tall and chubby. Yue Buqun recognized him: he was the Second Guardian of Songshan – Tower Holding Palm Ding Mian. And the one on his left turned out to be the expelled Sword-Branch apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, Feng Buping. Many of the Taishan and Hengshan masters who had visited Mount Huashan several days ago were also among them only that this time there were even more people than the last time. Under the faint light from the waterproof lanterns, shadows loomed, and in the short time, Yue Buqun had a hard time making out the rest of the people.

"Brother Yue," Lu Bai said, "you didn't accept the Command Flag from Chief

Zuo the other day, and Chief Zuo was a bit upset. That's why he sent apprentice brother Ding and Tang together with me to visit Mount Huashan again with the Command Flag. We had no idea that we would meet you here late at night? What a surprise!"

Yue Buqun kept his silence and did not reply.

"So it is Hero Ding, Hero Lu, and Hero Tang from the Songshan Sword School. What an honor to meet you!" the old man in the mask said, cupping his hands.

"You flatter me. May I have the honor to hear your name? Why don't you want to reveal your true identity?" The Seventh Guardian of Songshan, Tang Ying-E, asked.

"We are just a bunch of nobodies in the heterodox side," the old man in the mask replied. "If we speak out our ugly bandit nicknames, it would only be an insult to all you great masters' ears. Well, for the sake of you guys, we dare not show disrespect to Madam Yue and Miss Yue any more. But there is this one thing we'd like you to help uphold justice."

"What is the matter? Why don't you tell us about it?" Tang Ying-E suggested.

"Well, this Mister Yue Buqun here has a nickname called Gentleman Sword. We heard that he always talks about humanity, justice and virtues, and always abide by the rules of the Martial World. But what he has done recently seemed way off track. You must have heard that the Fortune Prestige Escort House in Fuzhou was wiped out and the Chief Master Lin Zhennan couple was murdered."

"Yes. I heard that the Qingcheng Sword School in Szechwan did that," Tang Ying-E responded.

The old man shook his head again and again. "That sure was the story floating around in the Martial World, but it wasn't the truth. Let's get to the bottom of this. Everyone knows that the Lin Family of the Fortune Prestige Escort House has the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript passed down from their ancestors, in which brilliant and profound sword art techniques were recorded. Once one

masters the sword art, he would have no match in the entire world. The reason that the Lin Zhennan couple got murdered was because someone coveted the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript."

"What about that?" Tang Ying-E asked.

"How exactly were the Lin Zhennan couple murdered and who did it? Outsiders wouldn't have a clue on that. We heard that this Gentleman Sword secretly plotted some cunning schemes and fooled Lin Zhennan's son into becoming a dead set apprentice of the Huashan Sword School. You see what I am saying? The sword manuscript of course was brought into the Huashan Sword School naturally. We thought about it and came to the conclusion that Yue Buqun was adept at scheming. He couldn't get it by force, so he tried to get it by trickery. Think about it. How much experience can a young chap Lin have? After he joined the Huashan Sword School, for sure the old fox would play him like a dummy and have him present the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript to his Master of his own will."

"But I am afraid that this is unlikely. The Huashan Sword School has brilliant sword art techniques of its own, and Mr. Yue's Divine Art of the Violet Twilight is also a powerful and unique Kung Fu in the Martial World – one of the best Qi-Gong techniques as a matter of fact. Why would he lust for sword art techniques in other style?" Tang Ying-E commented.

The old man smirked. "Hero Tang, you really are gauging the heart of a rascal with your own decent measures. What kind of brilliant sword art does Yue Buqun have? After the Sword-Branch and the Qi-Branch of the Huashan Sword School broke up, the Qi-Branch seized control of Mount Huashan. They only emphasized on working with their inner energy. Their sword skills are so ordinary and naïve. People in the Martial World respected the reputation of the Huashan Sword School and mistakenly thought that they actually have some true skills. But the truth is…a-ha, ha-ha…."

He paused for a second with a sneer, and then continued. "Logically speaking, since Yue Buqun is the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, his mastery of sword skills shouldn't have been ordinary. But you have all seen with your

own eyes that he was taken prisoner by us, a bunch of no names. We used neither poison, nor projectiles, and we didn't have overwhelming numbers. We relied on our true skills to take care of the Huashan Sword School masters and apprentices. We won the battle the hard way fair and square. From that you probably can figure out yourself how good their Kung Fu skills are. But of course Yue Buqun knew his own limitation. That's why he wants to get hold of the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript quickly so he could study the great sword arts and not make a fool out of himself in critical moments, so he wouldn't be carrying a fame that's untrue."

"Your words are certainly convincing." Tang Ying-E nodded.

"We are just a group of nobodies. In the eyes of great masters like you, our level of Kung Fu skills isn't even worth a laugh. We dare not hanker after for the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript. However, for the last ten years or so, thanks to Chief Master Lin of the Fortune Prestige Escort House who actually thought we were worth of something and kept sending us precious gifts. So when his escort wagons passed by our territory, none of us would touch it for the sake of good relationship. Recently, when we heard that Chief Master Lin ended up dead and his family ruined all because of that sword art manuscript, we couldn't help but feel very irritated. It has really aroused public indignation. That's why've decided to make Yue Buqun pay for this."

He paused for a moment and cast a glance at the group still on horsebacks before continuing, "All of you here, who have just arrived, are renowned heroes and masters in the Martial World. And among you, there are also reputable senior masters from the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, to which the Huashan Sword School belongs as a member school. We here resort to your judgment on this matter, and whatever you decide, we will comply."

"Brother, that's very kind of you. We really appreciate it. Apprentice brother Ding and Lu, what do you think we should do?" Tang Ying-E asked.

"Chief Zuo has said before, that the Head Master post of the Huashan Sword School should have belonged to Master Feng. Since Yue Buqun committed such despicable and brazen act today, we should just let Master Feng purify the

Huashan Sword School, himself!" Ding Mian replied.

Everyone on horsebacks agreed in unison, "Hero Ding has judged it so fair and clear. This is the internal affair of the Huashan Sword School, so naturally the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School himself should handle it. It would also save us from being accused of poking our noses into other people's business by fellow martial friends."

Feng Buping dismounted from his horse and bowed to everyone.

"I am very grateful for the due respect you have shown here. Ever since Yue Buqun usurped the Head Master post of our school, cries of discontent rise all the way up to heaven, and the reputation of our school had reached its ultimate low. And now he has sunk so low to commit the many wild things: killing one's father, seizing his sword art manuscript, and coercing him into becoming an apprentice. I am a man with no great virtue or abilities, and would have never been worth of the Huashan Sword School Head Master post, but I value the hardship the many past masters of the Huashan Sword School had to go through in order to uphold the reputation of our school, and I simply can not bear to watch our Huashan Sword School reduced to rubble in the hands of Yue Buqun, the unworthy apprentice. That's why I will have to undertake to do the difficult job as best as I can. Friends, will you please keep offering me advice and supervision as time goes on?" He bowed again.

The rain had not fully stopped and had turned into a light shower by then. Seven or eight of the riders had lit their torches. The fire from the torches shined upon Feng Buping's face, which looked immensely contented.

"Yue Buqun is guilty of the most heinous crimes, which are too severe for any clemency," Feng Buping went on. "We must follow the school rules and execute him on sight! Apprentice brother Cong, go ahead and execute the traitors, the Yue Buqun couple, to purify our Huashan Sword School."

"Got it!" a man in his fifties responded as he drew his blade and walked by Yue Buqun. "Yue Buqun, you corrupted our school; today is your judgment day!" He grinned hideously.

Yue Buqun heaved a deep sigh. “I see! Your Sword-Branch plotted this entire deadly trap so you can take over the Head Master post. Cong Buqi, if you kill me today, when your time comes, how are you going to face the many past masters of our Huashan Sword School in the underworld?”

“He who commits much wickedness brings death upon himself. You have committed so many crimes. Even if I don’t kill you, someone else will. But that wouldn’t be satisfactory at all, would it?” Cong Buqi smirked.

“Save your breath, apprentice brother Cong. Start the execution.” Feng Buping yelled.

“Yes,” Cong Buqi replied. He raised his long sword high and then retracted his elbow, getting ready for the deathblow. The blazing fire from the torches illuminated onto the naked blade of the sword and painted it red and green.

“Hold it!” Madam Yue suddenly shouted out. “Where is the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript then? To accuse one of stealing, at least you have to show the stolen goods as evidence. Do you think you can just convince everyone by making slanderous accusations?”

“That’s right!” Cong Buqi replied. He took several steps toward Madam Yue with a wicked grin. “That Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript is most likely hidden on you. I’d better do a body search so you won’t accuse us of making slanderous accusations.” He reached his left hand out toward Madam Yue’s bosom.

Madam Yue had been wounded in the legs and two of her acupoints were also sealed. She watched Cong Buqi’s big ugly hand reaching toward her, yet couldn’t move an inch. It would be a horrendous disgrace for her if his finger touched her skin. In tremendous despair, she shouted out loud, “Apprentice brother Ding from Songshan Sword School!”

“What?” Ding Mian asked, not expecting a call from Madam Yue at all.

“Your apprentice brother Chief Zuo is the chief of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, and sets a good example for everyone in the Martial World. Our Huashan Sword School also relies upon his leadership. How would you explain

to him if you let this blatant scoundrel disgrace a woman?" Madam Yue challenged.

"Well…." Ding Mian pondered and did not answer.

"That crook was telling a bold lie when he said that they didn't win with overwhelming numbers," Madam Yue said. "And as regards to these two traitors of the Huashan Sword School, if any one of them can defeat my husband on his own in a fair fight, we will give up the post of Head Master with all respects and no complaints. Otherwise, you will never get the recognition from the thousands of fellow martial people."

At the last word, she spat at Cong Buqi's face, all of a sudden. Since Cong Buqi was right next to her, and Madam Yue's action took him by a complete surprise, he couldn't move out of the way in time. The spit hit him right between his eyes.

"Damn you!" Cong Buqi cursed angrily.

"Listen up, you traitors! Your Sword-Branch only has low-grade Kung Fu. It doesn't require my husband. Even I, a woman, can kill you as easy as flipping my hand if I hadn't fallen a prey of a plot and had my acupoints sealed!" Madam Yue mocked furiously.

"Fine!" Ding Mian made his decision. He gave his black horse a light spur. The horse walked forward and circled behind Madam Yue. Turning his horsewhip around, he bent down slightly and poked it out. The shaft of the whip jabbed at three different acupoints on Madam Yue's back. A shock ran through Madam Yue's body as the two sealed acupoints were released.

As soon as Madam Yue gained control of her limbs again, she knew that Dian Mian intended to let her have a duel with Cong Buqi. The result of the duel would not only make a difference between life and death for the Yue family of three, it would also decide the ultimate fate of the entire Huashan School. If she could defeat Cong Buqi, it probably wouldn't turn danger into safety, but at least it would be a turn for the better. If she lost the duel, then there would be no hope. She grabbed her long sword, which was knocked down earlier, off the

ground, and held it across her chest in a stance. But her left leg suddenly gave out on her. She almost had to kneel down on her knees. The wounds on her legs were too severe, and as soon as she tried to use her legs, she found that they lacked enough strength to support her.

"You said you are only a woman. And now you are pretending to have injuries with your legs. Why are we having this sword contest at all? There's no glory in beating you!" Cong Buqi burst into loud laughter.

Madam Yue wanted no more words from him. "Here it comes!" she yelled and shot out three thrusts in tremendous speed. She had attached her inner strength to the blade. The sword whistled as it stabbed forward. Out of the three thrusts, each thrust went faster than the previous one and all were aimed at her opponent's vital parts.

"Nice!" Cong Buqi yelled as he took two steps back.

Normally, Madam Yue would have charged forward immediately following the attack, but she was afraid to take any risks with her weak legs and stood still instead.

Cong Buqi stepped forward again and started his own attack. Three loud rings echoed as flickers scattered in all directions. Those were three vicious thrusts, indeed. Madam Yue parried them one by one and immediately turned the third block into an attacking stance and stabbed at the enemy's lower abdomen.

Yue Buqun stood by the side and watched his wife fighting the tough opponent with wounded legs. Cong Buqi's sword techniques appeared to be delicate and exquisite. Compared to Madam Yue's techniques, they had way more clever variations. After exchanging ten moves or so, Madam Yue started to lose the agility and speed with her sword moves in her lower body. The Qi-Branch of the Huashan Sword School was good at overcoming the enemy with resourceful inner energy, but since Madam Yue had a hard time controlling her breathing after the injuries, her sword moves gradually lost the initiatives and became restricted by Cong Buqi's moves. Yue Buqun was greatly worried, and he became even more concerned when he saw his wife accelerate her

techniques.

"The Sword-Branch is better with their sword techniques, yet you are countering his sword techniques with your own. Countering the enemy's strong points with one's shortcomings would only lead to a defeat," he thought to himself.

Madam Yue also knew the fundamental ideas here within, but because the wounds on her legs were too severe, and in addition, her acupoints were sealed right after she inflicted the wounds, she was never able to tend the wounds; even now the wounds were still bleeding, how could she have gathered her inner energy to counter the attacks? At the moment, it was only her determination that had kept her going, and although her sword moves never slowed down, the strength in each move had started to decrease quickly. After another ten moves or so, Cong Buqi had detected Madam Yue's weak point. While feeling much delighted, he was in no rush for a quick win, and made sure he was putting up a good defense.

Linghu Chong was also watching the fight. Seeing that Cong Buqi's moves all focused on techniques, not strengths, completely different from what his Master had taught him, he thought to himself, "No wonder our school was divided into the Qi-Branch and the Sword-Branch. The two branches' Kung Fu styles are indeed opposite of each other."

He slowly struggled to get back on his feet. Reaching out around him, he found a long sword on the ground. "Our school has really suffered a crushing defeat today!" he thought. "But I will not allow the stainless reputation of Master-Wife and apprentice sister get ruined by those scoundrels. It seems that Master-Wife is no match for that man. Later I will have to kill Master-Wife and apprentice sister and then cut my own throat to preserve the reputation of our Huashan Sword School."

Madam Yue's sword moves became more and more disorganized. Suddenly, she turned her sword in blazing speed and thrust it out with a loud whoosh. This was none other than that proud move of hers – "Unrivaled and Unmatched, The Thrust of Ning." The thrust carried great momentum. Regardless of Madam

Yue's severe injures, it still looked utterly majestic.

Cong Buqi was astounded. He leapt back in a great hurry and luckily was able to dodge away from it. If Madam Yue's legs had been fine and that she followed the momentum with another attack, the enemy would have no chance of surviving, but all she could do was to hold her sword like a cane to keep her balance and wheezing like mad, her face completely pale.

"What's the matter, Madam Yue? Have you finally used up all your strength? Can I search you now?" Cong Buqi grinned evilly as he stepped closer and closer toward Madam Yue, his left hand opening wide, high in the air.

Madam Yue wanted to raise her sword and thrust forward, but it seemed as if her arm had weighed ten thousand pounds by then; she could no longer move her arm.

"Hold it!" Linghu Chong yelled as he walked by Madam Yue's side. "Master-Wife!" he called out and was ready to thrust his sword out to take away her life, thus saving her from any disgraceful humiliation.

"Good child!" Madam Yue nodded, her eyes filled with satisfaction. With all her strength exhausted, she could no longer keep herself in a standing position, and collapsed down onto the muddy ground.

"Get lost!" Cong Buqi yelled out while pricking his sword tip toward Linghu Chong's throat.

Linghu Chong knew too well that he had no strength left with his arms. If he reached his sword out to block, his sword would be instantly knocked out of his grip. So seeing that the sword tip came toward his throat, without much thinking, he also thrust his sword toward Cong Buqi's throat – a move that would end in a common ruin for both of them. His thrust was not specifically quick, but the positioning was simply dazzling – it was none other than the "Sword-breaking Stance" out of the Dugu Nine Swords.

Cong Buqi was stunned. He had never anticipated such a sudden counter attack from the young man covered in mud. Out of desperation, he dived down the ground and rolled till he was over ten feet away, and finally was able to

dodge the thrust. If he had come up with his solution only one second slower, he would not have survived it.

The entire audience watched Cong Buqi in such a sorry plight. By the time he leapt back onto his feet, his head, face, hands, and robe were completely covered with mud. Some couldn't help but burst into laughter. But after thinking about it some more, all had to agree that other than the rolling they had just seen, there was really no other way to dodge that move.

Hearing the laughter, Cong Buqi found himself consumed by embarrassment and fury. Holding his sword tight, he charged toward Linghu Chong in a leap.

Linghu Chong had made up his mind already. "I must not use any of my inner strength, and only counter him using sword stances taught by Grand Uncle-Master."

He was quite familiar with the Dugu Nine Swords already. He wouldn't have used it so boldly against such a tough enemy if it weren't a life-threatening situation for him. Right on the edge between life and death, he surprisingly found his head clear of all other thoughts. Instantly, all the complicated and magical techniques in the "Sword-breaking Stance" came clearly before his mind's eye. Seeing that Cong Buqi charged at him like a mad tiger, he spotted the flaw in Cong's move instantaneously. Holding his sword in a slight angle, he aimed the tip toward Cong's lower stomach.

When Cong Buqi charged forward, he figured that if his opponent didn't dodge, then the opponent would have to block with his weapon, therefore, even though his lower stomach was open to attacks, he really had no need to defend that part. But to his surprise, Linghu Chong didn't dodge and didn't block either, only pointing his sword tip in an angle and waited for him to put his own stomach onto the sword tip. Before his feet landed back onto the ground, while his entire body was still in mid-air, Cong Buqi had realized the danger ahead. In a frantic rush, he swung his sword toward Linghu Chong's sword. But Linghu Chong had anticipated that. He raised his right arm slightly. The sword went up two feet and now the sword tip pointed toward Cong Buqi's chest.

Cong Buqi had hoped that when he swung his sword, it would smack against Linghu Chong's long sword, and then he would be able to leap aside using that force. But he had never expected his opponent to turn his sword and point it upward all of a sudden. His swing was only met by thin air. And without any other forces, he could not change the direction his body was moving toward. He screamed in terror as his body flew right at Linghu Chong's sword.

Feng Buping dived forward with a jump and reached out to grab at Cong Buqi's back, but it was already too late. With a thump, Linghu Chong's sword tip had penetrated Cong Buqi's shoulder.

Missing out on the grab, Feng Buping immediately drew his sword and slashed it at Linghu Chong's back neck. Following normal sword art principles, Linghu Chong should have jumped back quickly before returning the attack, but with all his internal energy in a state of complete chaos, which prevented him from using any bit of inner strength, he simply couldn't jump back to dodge. Having no alternative, he retrieved his sword out from Cong Buqi's shoulder and used another technique out of the Dugu Nine Swords. Stabbing his sword out with a backhand, he pointed the sword tip at Feng Buping's belly button. It looked almost as if it was another death-defying move of Linghu Chong that would end up in common ruin, but the stab had a surprising position that his sword would have pierced the enemy's belly before the enemy's weapon would ever reach him. It would only be a split of a second difference in speed, but the end result would be dramatically different.

Feng Buping could tell that the opponent had no chance of fending off his slash, but to his great surprise, the young man conveniently launched a backhand stab toward his lower abdomen. What a vicious attack that was! He quickly took several steps back. After taking in a deep breath, he charged forward again with seven consecutive hits, each thrust or slash swifter than the previous one. The attacks swept toward Linghu Chong like a storm.

Linghu Chong gave no thought of life or death. All he had in his mind were the various sword art techniques Feng Qingyang had taught him. Occasionally, when a snapshot of the sword moves on the rock wall in the back cave flashed

by in his head, he would simply use them at will following the essence flow of his swordplay. Within moments, the two had exchanged over seventy moves, yet their swords never even collided once. Regardless of attacking or defending, all the sword art techniques shown were clever and profound.

Watching the dazzling sword fight by the side, the entire audience couldn't help but cheer inwardly. Everyone could hear the heavy panting from Linghu Chong. Clearly he didn't have much strength in him. However, brilliant sword moves and techniques emerged one after another from his sword with endless variations and changes. Every time when Feng Buping had difficulty countering Linghu Chong's moves, he would simply chop and slash with sheer force, knowing that the opponent would never try to block it and end up in a competition of strength, thus getting himself out of trouble.

Seeing the display of the undignified fighting style, some bystanders couldn't help but feel discontented. A Taoist priest from the Taishan Sword School spoke out.

"The apprentice from Qi-Branch has better sword skills and the Uncle-Master from Sword-Branch has better inner strength. What the hell is going on? Has the Qi-Branch and the Sword-Branch switched place for some fun?"

Feng Buping blushed at the remark as he waved his sword even faster, showering Linghu Chong in attacks like gusty wind and heavy rain. He was the best swordsman in the Sword-Branch of the Huashan Sword School, and his sword skills were indeed excellent.

Linghu Chong had no extra strength to move around. It already took all his strength to simply manage to stay standing. And because of that, he missed many good opportunities to secure a win. Besides, he was not yet proficient with all the sword techniques, and fighting such a top-notch fighter with his newly learned Dugu Nine Swords certainly aroused fear in his heart. As a result, the fight lasted for a long while and produced no winner.

Another thirty or so moves passed. Linghu Chong noticed that if he had simply thrust out at will, his opponent would be in a frantic rush and have a

hard time dealing with it, but if he had used any of the Huashan Sword School moves or moves of the Songshan, Hengshan, or Taishan sword schools drawn on the rock wall in the back cave, Feng Buping would be able to counter well and launch his counterattack immediately after. Once when Feng Buping drew three arcs at him with his long sword, his entire right arm was almost chopped off. Awfully dangerous indeed! Amid the frenzies, Feng Qingyang's words suddenly came to his mind, "When you don't have a sword stance, your enemy would have no way of countering it. Overcoming stances without a stance achieves the ultimate acme of sword art."

Actually through the over two hundred moves he exchanged with Feng Buping, he had comprehended the superb techniques of the Dugu Nine Swords better and better. Regardless of how vicious or fierce Feng Buping's sword moves were, he would always be able to spot the weaknesses and flaws within Feng's sword moves, and a simple thrust or slash from him, at will, would always force Feng Buping to retract his sword to defend. After some more moves exchanged, he slowly gained his confidence. By the time he remembered the key of "Overcoming stances without a stance" told by Feng Qingyang, he took a long breath and thrust his sword out with an odd angle. This thrust wasn't part of any sword move, not even part of the sword moves from the "Sword-breaking Stance" of the Dugu Nine Swords. It was weak, and tilted. Even he himself didn't know where he was pointing the sword.

"What kind of move is that?" Feng Buping thought to himself, confused. Not knowing how to counter that, he waved his own sword to protect his upper body.

Since Linghu Chong didn't have any limit or restriction with that thrust to start with, seeing that his opponent had guarded his upper body well, he gave a gentle shake to the sword tip and stabbed it at Feng Buping's waist. Feng Buping didn't anticipate such an odd change at all. Astounded, he leapt back three steps, while Linghu Chong remained still, not having any strength to lunge after him.

The fight had lasted for quite a while now. Even though Linghu Chong didn't use a bit of his inner energy, waving the sword about did require quite some

strength. Feeling exhausted, he breathed heavily while pressing his hand on his chest.

Realizing that Linghu Chong didn't follow up with the attack, Feng Buping didn't want the fight to just end like that. He sprang back and shot out four thrusts in a row toward Linghu Chong's chest, stomach, waist, and shoulder. Linghu Chong flicked his wrist and stabbed the sword toward Feng's left eye. Uttering a cry of shock, Feng Buping leapt back three steps again.

"Strange! Strange! That man's sword art is very admirable," The Taoist Priest from Taishan Sword School spoke again. The entire audience felt the same way, knowing that "that man's sword art" he admired had to be Linghu Chong's sword art, not Feng Buping's.

Feng Buping also heard the remark. He thought to himself, "I am able to take over the Huashan Sword School because I am the Head Master of the Sword-Branch. If I can't even defeat an apprentice of the Qi-Branch, not only would my grandiose plan to be the Head Master of Huashan Sword School burst in bubbles, I would certainly end up living a hermit's life again in some remote valley, too ashamed to face anyone in the Martial World." At that thought, he cried inwardly, "At this point, there's no need to hide it any more!"

With a loud roar, he charged forward in an angle, slashing his long sword horizontally and then bringing it swishing down through the air in an unprecedented speed. Within only five moves, whistles from wind gusts had rose dimly. He waved his sword faster and faster and the sound of the wind gusts also became louder and louder.

This set of sword art was called the "Quick Blizzard Sword Stance," and was created by Feng Buping while he lived in seclusion in Mount Zhongtiao for fifteen years. Each move would be even faster than the previous one, and the sound of wind gust would be louder and louder as well. It was the most valued sword art of his. Having some lofty aspirations, he not only wanted to head the entire Huashan Sword School, but also wished to become the chief of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance after getting the Head Master post. And this "Quick Blizzard Sword Stance" with one hundred and eight moves would have been the

tool to help him achieve his goals. He really didn't want to recklessly show this special skill of his, because once it was shown, it would no longer be a secret weapon of his, and if he got into fights with elite fighters, the enemy would have had precautions, and the effect of the set of sword arts would no longer be so dramatic. But there was no way to back down from the fight right now. If he couldn't defeat Linghu Chong, he would lose all face right at this moment. He was pretty much forced into using it as the last resort.

This set of "Quick Blizzard Sword Stance" was incredibly powerful without a doubt. The force created by the blade extended slowly. The audience could feel the cold front moving toward them while the wind gusts blew onto their faces and hands harshly, making them very uncomfortable, so everyone stepped back more and more. The circle around the two fighters gradually grew bigger and bigger, and soon reached the size of fifty feet in diameter.

By now, even the many masters from the Songshan, Taishan, Hengshan sword schools, and the Yue Buqun couple dared not underestimate Feng Buping. They all felt that not only his sword moves were brilliant, but also the swift and fierce force created by his blade. He apparently didn't only rely on his sword moves to win his battles. Feng Buping wasn't a renowned master in the Martial World; who would have thought that his sword skill was so incredible.

Flames from torches held by the many riders were all blown toward the outside by the forces from the blade, and the sound of wind gusts still seemed to be getting louder and louder.

In the eyes of the many witnesses, Linghu Chong was almost like a small boat traveling in a huge storm with crashing waves hundreds of feet high. In the roaring wind, terrifying waves smashed toward the small boat like landslides. But the small boat rode the wave high and low, never being swallowed by the mountain-sized waves.

The faster Feng Buping attacked, the more principles and essence of the sword art Linghu Chong comprehended based on the teaching of Feng Qingyang. The more they fought, the better Linghu Chong understood. And the better he was able to understand the many techniques of the sword stances, the more

confident he became. He found himself in no rush to end the fight; instead, he watched the various variations in the opponent's sword moves with rapt attention.

The "Quick Blizzard Sword Stance" was indeed very quick. Within moments, Feng Buping had used up the entire one hundred and eight moves. Seeing that it still failed to bring Linghu Chong down, he became restless with anxiety. Roaring in fury, he slashed and chopped with his long sword like a mad man, intending to force the opponent to block his attacks.

Linghu Chong was a bit frightened when he saw Feng Buping going all out in such a death-defying manner. Afraid to keep the fight any longer, he shook the blade of the long sword. "Swoosh, swoosh, swoosh, and swoosh!" The blade had left one cut each on Feng Buping's left arm, right arm, left leg, and right leg. "Clank," Feng Buping's sword fell down to the ground.

Because Linghu Chong didn't have much strength with his hand, the four thrusts were all done quite lightly, but that was enough to turn Feng Buping's face completely pale.

"Fine! Fine!" Feng Buping murmured. He turned around and cupped his hands toward Ding Mian, Lu Bai, and Tang Ying-E the trio. "Three apprentice brothers of the Songshan Sword School, will you please tell Chief Zuo that I am truly grateful for his great kindness. But…but my skills aren't good enough, and I am too ashamed…ashamed…" He cupped his hands again and then walked away quickly. After ten steps or so, he suddenly stopped and called out.

"Young man, your sword skills are truly incredible. I bow before you. But with such outstanding sword skills, I am sure even Yue Buqun is no match for you. May I have the honor to hear your respectful name, and the name of the great master who taught you the sword art, so I know who and what sword art I had lost to?"

"My name is Linghu Chong," Linghu Chong replied. "I am the Head Apprentice of my respectful Master – Yue Buqun. It was only because of your mercy, senior master, that I was able to win a move by sheer luck. There's

nothing to be proud of."

Feng Buping heaved a long sigh, his voice dreary and gloomy. Slowly, he walked away, and soon, faded into the darkness.

Ding Mian, Lu Bai, and Tang Ying-E looked at each other, all thinking, "My sword skills perhaps aren't even as good as Feng Buping's. Then of course I would be no match for Linghu Chong, either. If we swarm forward to attack Linghu Chong all together, it wouldn't be a difficult task to slice him into bits and pieces on the spot. But when so many masters from different schools are here as well, something like that would be completely out of the question." With the same thought in mind, the three nodded at each other.

"Nephew Linghu," Ding Mian said in a loud voice, "your sword art is brilliant and broadened everyone's horizons. Farewell for now. I am sure we'll meet again someday!"

"Let's go!" Tang Ying-E waved his left hand and then turned his horse around. Giving the horse a good spur, he rode away like a wind. The rest of the group followed behind him, and within moments, all vanished into the darkness. The sounds of hoof beats became lighter and lighter, and soon, the night was, once again, swept with silence. By now, other than the bunch from the Huashan Sword School, there were only those masked men left outside of the monastery.

The old man in the mask let out a few wry laughs and broke the silence. "Young hero Linghu, you have outstanding sword skills and we all admire you truly. Yue Buqun's Kung Fu skills are far from yours. You should have been the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School." He paused for a second and then continued, "After seeing the brilliant sword art you have displayed, we really should have beaten a retreat in the face of difficulties. But since we have greatly offended your respectful school, it's going to be endless trouble for us. Well, we must destroy both the root and the branches. I guess we'd better take advantage of you while you are injured and take you on with overwhelming numbers then."

He signaled with a whistle, and the rest of the fourteen masked men pushed

their position forward and surrounded Linghu Chong. When Ding Mian and the bunch left, they threw their torches on the ground randomly. The flames had not been extinguished yet, so only the lower portion of everyone's body was lit, and their body portion above their waists remained vague in the dark. Their weapons shined from reflections of the flames as the fifteen masked men closed in on Linghu Chong.

When Linghu Chong fought Feng Buping earlier, even though it didn't consume any of his inner energy, it did exhaust him and covered him with sweat. The reason he was able to defeat the first-class master of the Huashan Sword School Sword-Branch was because he had learned the Dugu Nine Swords and was able to take the initiative of the different moves. But these fifteen men in mask had many different types of weapons and used many different styles of moves. When they all attacked at once, there would be no way for him to counter each one of them. Without the ability to use his inner energy, he couldn't even jump forward three feet or leap five feet sideways, how would he manage to break out from the combined attack of the fifteen elite fighters? He let out a deep sigh and turned his eyes toward Yue Lingshan, knowing that this would probably be the last glance before his end, and hoping that he would get some relief from the expression on Yue Lingshan's face. Sure enough, he found Yue Lingshan's pretty eyes fixed on him filled with worry and care. Linghu Chong felt a surge of joy. Then, he saw her hand hang by her side, and it was holding a hand of a man. A quick glance told Linghu Chong that the man was none other than Lin Pingzhi. Welled with depression, Linghu Chong lost his will to fight completely and almost wanted to throw down his long sword and simply let the enemy have him.

Afraid of the brilliant performance he had shown during the fierce fight with Feng Buping, the fifteen masked men approached forward half a step at a time, on one dared to launch the first attack.

Linghu Chong turned around slowly and stared at the fifteen masked men. Their thirty eyes shined through the holes on their masks like the eyes of fierce wild animals, filled with cruelty and hostility. Suddenly, a thought sparked in his

head.

"The eighth stance of the Dugu Nine Sword, 'Missile-breaking Stance,' can counter all types of projectiles and darts. Even if the enemy has shot thousands of arrows at me, or dozens of people shooting many kinds of projectiles and darts at me, I would be able to knock all of them down using this one stance."

"Let's attack all at once and cut him into shreds!" the old man in the mask shouted.

Having no time for any further thoughts, Linghu Chong sent his sword out and used the "Missile-breaking Stance" of the Dugu Nine Swords. The tip of the sword vibrated as it thrust at the eyes of the fifteen men. Cries in terror rose one after another, and then bangs echoed as the many kinds of weapons fell to the ground. Within a split of a second, Linghu Chong had blinded the thirty eyes of the fifteen masked men with extraordinarily swift thrusts.

The "Missile-breaking Stance" of the Dugu Nine Swords was capable of hitting thousands of projectiles and darts. To be able to hit the thousands of targets, of course some would be hit before some others. But because the thrusts were so fast that it seemed as if all the thrusts were shot out at the exact same time. This stance must be able to hit every target with every thrust. If one thrust had missed the target, the enemy's dart would have hit the practitioner. Linghu Chong was not proficient with this stance, yet, but it was obviously much easier to try to hit human eyes that were slowly approaching compared to hitting projectiles and darts approaching in high speed. He thrust out thirty times and hit all thirty eyes on target.

As soon as he completed the thrusts, Linghu Chong dashed out from the crowd. Holding on to the doorframe, he trembled hard, his face completely pale. Then a loud bang echoed as his sword fell out of his hand and hit the ground. He watched as the fifteen masked men each having their hands covering their eyes, blood dripping out from between their fingers. Some squatted down to the ground; some cried out loudly; some rolled back and forth in mud.

When the fifteen masked men, all of a sudden, saw only complete darkness

accompanied by excruciating pain, in astonishment and terror, all they could think of was to cover their eyes and cry in pain. If they had been able to calm down and continue with their group attack, Linghu Chong for sure would have been chopped into shreds. But regardless of how high one's Kung Fu skills are, who would be able to stay calm when someone had blinded his eyes, all of a sudden? Who would be able to continue his attacks toward the enemy? The fifteen men stumbled about in every direction like a bunch of headless flies, not able to decide what to do next.

In the critical moment, Linghu Chong actually managed to succeed with his strike. He was overjoyed. But seeing the pitiful sight, he couldn't help but feel a mixed feeling of fear and pity.

Half shocked and half joyful, Yue Buqun yelled loudly, "Chong, cut their tendons in their legs so we can interrogate them slowly."

"Yes…yes…." Linghu Chong answered and bent down to retrieve his sword. But when he used that move a moment ago, it had actually triggered the energy flow inside him. Trembling nonstop, he simply could not grab onto his long sword. Then his knee gave out completely and he collapsed.

"Everyone, use your right hand to pick up your weapon and use your left hand to grab onto the waistband from the one next to you. Then follow me!" the old man in the mask shouted.

The other fourteen masked men had been at a loss on what to do. Getting the command from the old man, all bent down to fumble on the ground. And regardless of what kind of weapon they were able to grab onto, they would pick it up. Some were able to pick up two and some weren't even able to find one. Each one grabbed onto a fellow masked man's waistband and stringed himself together with the group. Following the old man, all of them staggered their way through the puddles of mud and disappeared in the pouring rain.

Except for Madam Yue and Linghu Chong, all members of the Huashan Sword School had their acupoints sealed and couldn't move an inch. Madam Yue had severe wounds on both of her legs and couldn't walk. Linghu Chong, on the

other hand, had lost all his strength and could only lie on the ground still. Everyone could clearly see that the fifteen masked men had become completely defenseless, yet none could keep them from getting away.

Chapter 13: Learning Music

Translated by Lanny Lin



Linghu Chong tried playing the "Song of Blue Heaven". Although the fingering was not fluent, in addition, several notes were off, from the music, one could still vision the spectacular spacious view of the cloudless sky.

The night was quiet now. The only noise came from the heavy breathings of the many Huashan apprentices.

“Hero Linghu, aren’t you going to release my sealed acupoints, or are you

waiting for us to beg you?" Yue Buqun suddenly broke the silence in a chilling tone.

Linghu Chong was stunned. "Master, why…why are you kidding me like that? I…I'll help release your acupoints right away." His voice trembled.

Getting back onto his feet after some hard struggles, he staggered by Yue Buqun.

"Ma…Master, which acupoints?" he asked.

Yue Buqun was furious. He remembered how Linghu Chong had put on the act of stabbing himself on Mount Huashan, not wanting to kill Tian Boguang. Then, of course, it was just the same kind of act Linghu Chong was playing right now. This way, he could let the fifteen masked men escape by intentionally not releasing his Master's sealed acupoints for a delay, afraid that his Master would chase after those masked villains. At that thought, he yelled angrily, "Save your breath!"

He continued working on gathering his inner energy using the Divine Art of the Violet Twilight in an effort to break open the sealed acupoints. Ever since the enemy had sealed his acupoints, he had been trying to break them open using his strong inner energy. But the one who had sealed his acupoints did it with a tremendous amount of force, and in addition, among the sealed acupoints were Yu-Zhen, Tan-Zhong, Ju-Zhui, Jian-Zhen, and Zhi-Tang those major acupoints. When he sent his inner energy flowing through his inner channels and passages, the flow was somewhat blocked in those major acupoints, which greatly reduced the power of the Divine Art of Violet Twilight and made it very hard to break them open.

Linghu Chong wanted to help his Master in releasing the sealed acupoints, but he simply didn't have any strength left in him. Again and again, he struggled to raise his arm, but every time the effort only made him feel sick while seeing golden flickers circling in front of his eyes and hearing loud buzzing sound in his ear. So all he could do was to lie next to Yue Buqun and wait for his Master to release his acupoints with his own efforts.

Madam Yue also lay on the ground facing down. Earlier in the state of fury, she had accidentally misdirected her inner energy. As a result, not only couldn't she gather her strength at all, she couldn't even lift her hand up to cover the wounds on her legs.

It was already daybreak by now, and the rain had finally stopped. People's faces became clearer and clearer in the dim light of dawn. A white and thick mist appeared on Yue Buqun's head as he worked hard on breaking his sealed acupoints open. His face almost turned completely purple. Suddenly, he uttered a loud roar as his inner energy finally broke through all his sealed acupoints and begun circulation around his body. Leaping back onto his feet, he circled around all of the Huashan apprentices, patting and smacking on some of them while poking or pinching some others. Within moments, he had opened all the sealed acupoints for everyone. Then sitting by Madam Yue, he started sending his inner energy into Madam Yue through her acupoints to help her redirect her own energy flow. Meanwhile, Yue Lingshan rushed forward hurriedly and started tending the wounds on her mother's legs.

Thinking back about how narrowly everyone had escaped death the night before, all the apprentices shivered in their hearts, feeling as if they were given a new life. And the heartbreaking scene of the beheaded Liang Fa's corpse only brought down more tears from the many Huashan apprentices. Several female apprentices burst into loud cries. The same thought floated in everyone's mind, "Fortunately big apprentice brother defeated the bunch of villains, or else it would be dreadful to even contemplate."

Seeing that Linghu Chong was still lying in a puddle of mud, Gao Gengming strode by him and prodded him up.

"Chong, where are those fifteen masked men from?" Yue Buqun asked dryly.

"I…I don't know, Master," Linghu Chong muttered.

"You do know them, right? Are they your friends?" Yue Buqun asked again.

"I've never met any one of them before last night," Linghu Chong gasped in astonishment.

“If so, when I told you to keep them here, so we could interrogate them later, why did you ignore my order?”

“I…I…was too exhausted and couldn’t gather any strength. Even now… now….” His body wobbled. It looked as if just to remain standing up was already a tough task for him.

“What a fine act!” Yue Buqun snorted.

Sweat streamed down from Linghu Chong’s forehead. He bent his knees and knelt down on the ground.

“I was an orphan when I was young, and thanks to the immense kindness of Master and Master-Wife, you took me under your wings and treated me like your own son. I am indeed an unworthy apprentice, but I would never dare disobey my Master’s orders or deceive Master and Master-Wife intentionally.”

“You dare not to deceive me and your Master-Wife? Humph, then where did you learn those sword arts of yours? Don’t tell me that a spirit just fell out of the sky and taught you those in your dreams.” Yue Buqun scoffed.

“I beg for your forgiveness, Master. The senior master who taught me the sword arts specifically asked me to promise that I would keep his name a secret and never tell anyone about the origin of the sword arts, not even my Master and Master-Wife.” Linghu Chong explained hurriedly, bumping his head to the floor again and again toward his Master.

“That’s of course.” Yue Buqun sneered. “With such superb Kung Fu, it’s only natural that you think nothing of your Master and Master-Wife. How would the little bit of Kung Fu from our Huashan Sword School ever stand a chance against a blow from your super sword? Didn’t that old man in mask mention it? You should have been the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School all along.”

Daring not to reply, Linghu Chong kept kowtowing as many thoughts flashed inside his head. “If I don’t tell them how Grand Uncle-Master Feng taught me the sword arts, Master and Master-Wife would certainly not forgive me. But a true man must keep his own words. Even Tian Boguang, an evil rapist, didn’t let out anything about Grand Uncle-Master Feng when the Peach Valley’s Six

Fairies performed the much torturing and torments on him. I owe Grand Uncle-Master a great debt of gratitude; I will not let him down. My loyalty towards Master and Master-Wife is true, and Heaven can be my witness. Being wronged like this temporarily is really no big deal."

"Master, Master-Wife," Linghu Chong said, "it's not that I am so bold as to disobey Master's orders. There are really some unspeakable causes here. Please allow me to beg that senior master and ask for his permission, so I can tell Master and Master-Wife everything in a later date. By then, I would not dare to keep any detail to myself."

"Fine! You can get up now," Yue Buqun replied.

Linghu Chong kowtowed to his Master again before standing up. Suddenly, both of his knees gave out on him and he fell back to the kneeling position. Lin Pingzhi happened to be standing next to Linghu Chong. Reaching his arm out, he propped Linghu Chong up.

"Your sword skills are excellent, and your acting skills are even better," Yue Buqun said with a sneer.

Afraid to say another word, Linghu Chong kept his silence. "I can never say enough about my gratitude to Master," he thought. "Even though he wronged me this time, one day, the truth will eventually come to light. This whole thing is so very odd. I really can't blame the respectful Master for feeling suspicious." Though he had been wronged, he really had no resentments.

Madam Yue's voice rose in a warm tone, "If it weren't for Chong's ingenious sword arts, not only would the entire Huashan Sword School be wiped out, perhaps all the female apprentices would have suffered tremendous humiliation. Regardless of who that senior master is, because he taught Chong the sword arts, we have benefited from his grace a great deal. And regarding the origin of those fifteen villains, I am sure we'll find that out one day. How could they have been Chong's friends? Weren't they going to slice Chong into shreds? Didn't Chong blind all of them with his stabs?"

His head held high, Yue Buqun seemed to have fallen into a daze and didn't

hear a single word from Madam Yue.

The many apprentices soon found themselves busy with different things. Some started a fire and worked on preparing breakfast; some dug a grave and buried Liang Fa. After breakfast, everyone changed into dry clothes from their packs. All the apprentices stared at Yue Buqun and waited for his command. "Are we still going to Mount Songshan to have it out with Chief Zuo?" they all thought. "Since Feng Buping has lost to big apprentice brother in the sword contest, he would be too embarrassed to fight for the Huashan Sword School Head Master post again."

"Junior apprentice sister, where do you think we should go?" Yue Buqun asked Madam Yue.

"There's no need to go to Mount Songshan now. But since we are already far from Mount Huashan, there's no need to go back in any hurry, either," Madam Yue remarked. She was so afraid of the Peach Valley's Six Fairies and dared not to go right back so soon.

"In any case, since we have some time now, I think it's a good idea to travel around a bit and see the world. It would generate good experience for all the apprentices," Yue Buqun replied.

Yue Lingshan was overjoyed. "Wonderful, Daddy…." She clapped her hands. But she suddenly remembered that it would be very inappropriate to look so happy when her senior apprentice brother Liang Fa had just been killed. She halted abruptly only after one clap.

"Look how excited you get every time when I mention the word travel. Alright, we'll let you have the fun. Lingshan, where would you like to go visit?" Yue Buqun asked with a smile, looking toward Lin Pingzhi as he spoke.

"Daddy, if we are going to have fun, we might as well have some big fun. I say the further we go the better. It would be really disappointing if we head back after only a hundred miles out or so. Why don't we go visit Little Lin's hometown? Second apprentice brother and I have been to Fuzhou before, but too bad that I had to disguise myself into an ugly girl and didn't get to walk

around much. I didn't see jack! The longan fruits in Fujian are so big and yummy. And there're also oranges, banyan trees, and narcissus flowers…."

Madam Yue shook her head. "Fujian Province is thousands of miles away from here. We don't have that kind of money to travel! Unless Huashan School turns into the Beggars Clan, and we just all beg our way through."

"Master, Master-Wife, we are only a couple of days trip away from Henan Province. My grandparents live in Luoyang," Lin Pingzhi said.

"Oh, that's right. Your grandfather Wang Yuanba, the Unbeatable Golden Blade, lives in Luoyang," Madam Yue responded.

"Both of my parents have passed away. I would love to visit my grandpa and grandma so they could get the details on my parents' death. I am certain that my grandpa and grandma would be honored to have Master, Master-Wife, and apprentice brothers and sisters as their guests, and spend some time there. Then after that, we can take our time on our tour and visit my hometown in Fujian. I was able to seize a good amount of gold and jewels back from the Qingcheng Sword School at the Changsha branch of the Escort House, so please don't worry…about the traveling expenses," Lin Pingzhi replied.

Ever since Madam Yue stabbed the Fruit Fairy, she had been in a constant state of worry. It was all still so clear in her memory how four of the Fairies had grabbed her arms and legs and lifted her off ground. Every time she thought of it, she would freeze with terror. And then the horrifying scene of Chen Buyou's death, with blood and internal organs splashing everywhere as he was tore into four pieces, would follow, driving her crazy with fear. Horrifying nightmares had been haunting her for many nights. She knew clearly that they were really fleeing from a calamity under the name of going to Mount Songshan to reason with the Songshan Sword School. Seeing that Lin Pingzhi had invited everyone to visit Fujian after her husband gave him a glance, she figured that the further they could flee the better. Besides, her husband and herself had never visited the south part of the country before, so it didn't sound like a bad idea to check it out at all. With these thoughts in her mind, she spoke with a smile.

“Senior apprentice brother, Little Lin is offering free food and lodging. Care to take advantage of him?”

“Pingzhi’s grandfather, Unbeatable Golden Blade, enjoys great fame in the central region. I’ve been looking forward to meeting him someday, but unfortunately never had the chance. Putian in Fujian Province is where the Southern Shaolin Temple resides. It couldn’t have lacked reputable masters. Let’s pay a visit to Luoyang and Fujian Province. It would certainly be a worthwhile trip if we are lucky to make some friends along the trip.” Yue Buqun smiled.

Hearing that the Master had agreed to go on a trip to Fujian for fun, the many apprentices were all jubilant. Gazing at each other, Lin Pingzhi and Yue Lingshan found themselves wild with joy.

Linghu Chong was the only one in low spirit.

“Of all the places, why did Master and Master-Wife pick Luoyang to visit apprentice brother Lin’s grandpa and Fujian, which is thousands of miles away?” Linghu Chong couldn’t help but think. “It is self-evident that they have decided to betroth little apprentice sister to apprentice brother Lin. They are going to Luoyang to visit the seniors of his family for an engagement, and when we get to Fujian, they’d probably hold the wedding ceremony right at Lin Family’s house. I am only an orphan who has no parents, nor relatives, while his family owned Fortune Prestige Escort House, which has so many branches in so many cities. How can I be any match for him? Apprentice brother Lin is going to Luoyang to visit his grandpa and grandma. When I follow him there, what would I have become?”

He felt even more displeased seeing how the apprentice brothers and sisters all bursting with joy with no regard to the tragic death of Liang Fa.

“Maybe I should just leave quietly in the dark tonight after we settle in an inn,” he thought to himself. “How can I just follow everyone else to enjoy apprentice brother Lin’s free meals and spend his money, and then put on an air of cheerfulness to congratulate little apprentice sister and him, wishing them to live

happily ever after?”

The group of Huashan School hit the road again as Linghu Chong followed behind. Weak and exhausted, he walked slower and slower, and soon, he fell far behind everyone else. By noon, he decided to sit down on a big rock alongside the road to catch his breath, when he saw Lao Denuo stride back in big steps.

“Big apprentice brother! How do you feel? You must be tired. I’ll wait for you,” Lao Denuo said.

“Oh, thanks!” Linghu Chong replied.

“Master-Wife has hired a wagon for you in the town ahead. It should be coming anytime now,” Lao Denuo mentioned.

Warmth swelled in Linghu Chong’s heart. “Although Master is suspicious of me, Master-Wife is still treating me dearly,” he thought to himself.

Not long after, a mule-pulled wagon showed up. Linghu Chong entered the wagon and Lao Denuo accompanied him by his side. That night, when they settled in an inn, Lao Denuo shared the same room with him. And in the following two days, Lao Denuo never even went out of his sight. Linghu Chong was quite grateful that a fellow apprentice brother was so kind to care for a wounded patient.

“When junior apprentice brother Lao joined our Huashan School, he had already received prior martial arts training. He is much older than I am, and wouldn’t even spare much word with me during normal days. Who would have thought that he would treat me with so much caring after what happened to me. All the other apprentice brothers don’t even dare to talk with me much, after seeing the stern face Master has shown me. The old saying is so true: As distance will test a horse’s endurance, so will time reveal a person’s heart.”

At the third night, as Linghu Chong was resting in bed with his eyes shut, some kind of whisper suddenly caught his attention. It was little apprentice brother Shu Qi whispering at the door.

“Second apprentice brother, Master sent me to check with you if big

apprentice brother has done anything unusual today."

"Hush! Outside!" Lao Denuo hushed hurriedly and whispered back.

A cold shiver ran through Linghu Chong's heart. Just from these few words he had realized what a tremendous suspicion Master actually had toward him. Master only sent Lao Denuo to secretly keep a watch on his every move.

Shu Qi walked away on tiptoes, and Lao Denuo walked by the bed slowly to check if Linghu Chong had really fallen asleep.

Infuriated, Linghu Chong almost wanted to leap onto his feet right away and yell at him, but then he had a second thought.

"Why should I blame him? He really has nothing to do with this. He is only following Master's order. Would he have dared to defy the Master?" So he forced back his anger and pretended to have fallen asleep.

Lao Denuo walked out of the room gingerly. Linghu Chong knew that he must have gone to the Master for a report. He couldn't help but sneer inwardly, "Humph, I never did anything guilty. Even if you have ten or one hundred people watching every step of mine, days and nights, I am open and aboveboard. What's there for me to be afraid of?"

Indignation filled his heart as he breathed wildly, and suddenly, it triggered a slight inner energy flow inside him. Waves of energy streams swirled inside him and made him feel miserable. He held onto the headrest tightly and gasped loudly. Only after a long while, the nausea finally went away. He sat up, threw on some clothing, and started to put on his shoes, thinking, "Since Master is no longer treating me like an apprentice of his, and instead, is on guard against me as if I am a thief, why should I even bother to stay in the Huashan Sword School? Maybe it would be better if I simply leave and not worry about whether Master would ever understand me one day."

Right at that moment, he heard more whispers from under the window on the outside.

"Stay down and don't move," a voice said.

“Sounds like big apprentice brother is getting off his bed,” another voice replied.

The two said those words in whisper, but because it was a silent night, besides that Linghu Chong had excellent hearing abilities, he was actually able to hear every single word clearly and also recognize that the voices belonged to two young apprentice brothers of his. Apparently they were hiding in the courtyard to guard the room in case Linghu Chong would flee.

Linghu Chong clenched his fists hard. Cracks from his knuckles echoed in the silent night. “If I leave now, they would think that my guilty conscience has overcome me, and I am running away. Fine! Fine! I’d rather stay! You can do whatever you want to me! What do I care?” he thought.

“Waiter, waiter! Bring me some wine!” he suddenly broke into a loud yell.

After quite some shouting, the waiter finally answered and brought him some wine. One cup after another, Linghu Chong slammed the wine down his throat. Soon he became dead drunk and passed out. The next morning when Lao Denuo prodded him into the wagon, half drunk and half awake, he just kept yelling, “Bring me more wine, I want more wine!”

Several days later, the Huashan group arrived at the city of Luoyang and settled in a big inn. Lin Pingzhi went to his grandfather’s house by himself, first. Yue Buqun and the bunch of apprentices all changed into clean clothing. Linghu Chong never took off the mud stained long robe he wore in the fierce fight outside of the monastery, so he was still covered with filth and looked very drunk. Yue Lingshan came to him with a long robe in her hands.

“Big apprentice brother, will you change into this robe please?”

“This is Master’s robe. Why do you want me to put it on?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Little Lin is inviting us to his family a bit later. Why don’t you put Dad’s robe on?” Yue Lingshan answered.

“Who said we have to put on nice clothing before visiting his family?” Linghu

Chong snubbed as he looked at Yue Lingshan up and down.

Yue Lingshan wore a thin cotton-padded jacket with green silk tops paired with a light green satin skirt. She had put on a thin layer of makeup on her face. Her dark hair was neatly combed and shined beautifully with a flower shaped pearl hairpin by the side. Linghu Chong remembered that she would only dress up nicely during the Chinese New Year. Feeling bitter in his heart, he wanted to spill out some more mocking words, but then he thought that a true man shouldn't act so narrow-mindedly, and held his tongue.

Yue Lingshan felt somewhat embarrassed from Linghu Chong's sharp stare. "If you don't want to, then you don't have to change," she said.

"I am not used to wearing new clothes. I'd better not change then," Linghu Chong replied.

Not wanting to argue with him, Yue Lingshan left with the robe still in her hands.

A resonant voice rose from outside the door, "Head Master Yue has come such a long way here, and I didn't greet promptly. What a lack of manners!"

Yue Buqun knew that it must have been the Unbeatable Golden Blade – Wang Yuanba – who had come to the inn personally to greet them. Casting a pleased smile toward his wife, he felt quite contented. After the couple greeted out, what they saw was an old man in his seventies. His face shined in a healthy redness while the bush of grey beard drifted in the breeze. He looked certainly hale and hearty. In his left palm were two goose-egg-sized golden balls, which rubbed against each other and echoed as he rolled them in his hand. It was common for martial people to play with iron balls in their hands, but they would have been made out of iron or steel. What Wang Yuanba had in his hands were two balls made from pure gold, which not only were twice the weight of regular iron balls, but also looked much more luxurious. As soon as he spotted Yue Buqun, he burst into joy.

"What an honor this is! Head Master Yue has such a great reputation in the Martial World. I have been longing to meet you for the last twenty years. Now

that you have come to Luo Yang, what a wonderful event it is for the martial arts society in the central region."

He shook Yue Buqun's right hand again and again happily. The joy on his face was truly sincere.

"My wife and I have decided to bring our apprentices to travel around so they could gain some experience in the world," Yue Buqun said with a smile. "And you, the Unbeatable Golden Blade Grandmaster Wang, the Great Master of the Central Region, is the first on our list to visit, but the dozens of us are really being crude to just show up so abruptly uninvited."

"Alright now, nobody is allowed to mention the words 'Unbeatable Golden Blade' again in front of Head Master Yue. Anyone mentioning those words would be only putting me done instead of flattering me. Mr. Yue, your saving of my grandson is a favor tantamount to giving him a new lease on life. Starting from now on, the House of Golden Blade and the Sword School of Huashan are both parts of one big family. Come, come! All of you will move to my house. No one will be allowed to leave until you have lived in my house for at least half a year. Head Master Yue, I'll even help you carry your luggage."

"That's very kind of you! I certainly don't deserve that!" Yue Buqun replied in a hurry.

"Bofen, Zhongqiang, kowtow to Uncle-Master Yue and Uncle-Master-Wife Yue," Wang Yuanba turned his head and called to his two sons standing behind him.

Wang Bofen and Wang Zhongqiang both acknowledged and knelt down to salute. In a hurry, the Yue Buqun couple also knelt down to salute back.

"Please just call us by our names. 'Uncle-Master' would be so inappropriate. Even just for Pingzhi's sake, we are of the same generation," Yue Buqun remarked.

Wang Bofen and Wang Zhongqiang are both famous masters around the Henan Province and Hubei Province. Though they had always admired Yue Buqun, neither of them really wanted to kowtow to him. They had knelt down

reluctantly only because their father had told them to do so, so both were very pleased to see that the Yue Buqun couple also kowtowed back to them. All four of them stood up after saluting each other.

Yue Buqun took a good look at the two: both brothers were tall, only that Wang Zhongqiang was a lot chubbier in comparison, and both had temples plumped high and strong veins and bones that could be clearly seen on their hands. Evidently, the two brothers had great strength both internally and externally.

"All of you come forward and show your respect to Grandmaster Wang and the two Uncle-Masters," Yue Buqun called out to the Huashan apprentices. "The House of Golden Blade's martial arts skills enjoyed a great reputation in the central region of the martial society. Our Grandmaster in the last generation also respected the House of Golden Blade very much. You are very fortunate to have Grandmaster Wang and the two Uncle-Masters give you some pointers. I am sure you will all benefit a great deal from this."

"Yes, Master!" the many apprentices replied in unison, and seconds later, the lobby of the inn was filled with apprentices kneeling down on the floor, showing their respects.

"You really flatter me!" Wang Yuanba smiled brightly as Wang Bofen and Wang Zhongqiang both cupped their hands and greeted back with a half salute.

Lin Pingzhi stood by the side and introduced each of the Huashan apprentices to his grandpa. The Wang Family was a wealthy family. Wang Yuanba had prepared presents for each of the guests ahead of time. Each gift consisted of forty taels of silver. The two brothers in the Wang Family took on the job of distributing the presents. By the time Lin Pingzhi introduced Yue Lingshan, Wang Yuanba said to Yue Buqun with a big grin.

"Little brother Yue, your daughter is such a beautiful girl; is she engaged to anyone yet?"

"The girl is still too young. Besides, in a martial family like ours, a girl plays with swords and knives all day long just like any boy would. She doesn't know

anything about embroidering or cooking. Who would want such a wild girl to be their daughter-in-law?" Yue Buqun also grinned.

"You are really being modest!" Wang Yuanba replied with a beam. "An extraordinary family would, of course, raise an extraordinary daughter. It is only natural that lads from ordinary families would not have dared to claim kinship with her. But you are right, it would be better if the girl learned some girly things." At that word, he lowered his voice and seemed to have lost in deep feelings.

Yue Buqun knew that he must have thought of his daughter who had passed away in Hunan Province not long ago, so he put on a solemn face and responded, "Yes."

Wang Yuanba was a man of frank and open personality. He quickly put himself together from the pain of losing a daughter and spoke again with a bright smile.

"Your daughter is talented and beautiful. It would certainly be a difficult task to find a young hero good enough to pair up with her."

By then, Lao Denuo had gone back in the inn room and prodded Linghu Chong out. Staggering along, Linghu Chong kowtowed to neither Wang Yuanba nor the Wang brothers, and only bowed down deeply.

"Linghu Chong here shows his respect to Grandmaster Wang and the two Uncle-Masters," he said.

"Aren't you going to kowtow?" Yue Buqun frowned.

Wang Yuanba had heard from his grandson earlier that Linghu Chong had severe internal wounds, so he said with a smile, "Nephew Linghu is not feeling well. There's no need for excessive manners. Little brother Yue, your Huashan School's inner energy skill is said to be the best in the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, then I am sure your wine tolerance must be extraordinary. Come on! Let's go drink ten bowls of wine each."

Holding Yue Buqun's hand in his own, he led Yue Buqun out of the inn.

Madam Yue, Wang Bofen, Wang Zhongqiang, and the rest of the Huashan apprentices all followed behind them. Many wagons and horses had been lined up outside of the inn with fine-looking saddles and bridle; wagons for all the females and horses for the males, ready to take the honorable guests. It was a mere two hours between the time Lin Pingzhi headed out to inform the Wang Family and the time Wang Yuanba came to the inn to greet his guests. Only from the fact that all the wagons and horses had been ready in such a short time, one can easily tell the kind of great power the Golden Blade Wang Family enjoyed in the city of Luoyang.

The group soon arrived at the mansion of the Wang Family. The building looked tall and majestic with a gate painted in vermilion. The two huge copper rings attached to the gate must have been cleaned frequently as they dazzled brilliantly in the sunlight. Eight brawny guards stood by the gate silently, their arms behind their back, all ready to take commands from their Master. And inside the gate, a huge black board hung from the girder with the words “Help for a Just Cause” painted in gold. The words at the lower portion of the board showed that a governor of Henan Province had inscribed the calligraphy.

That night, Wang Yuanba put out a large banquet to welcome Yue Buqun and the rest of the Huashan apprentices. Not only did he invite many famous masters in the local martial arts society to welcome the noble visitors, among the guests were also numerous wealthy business owners and local celebrities. Linghu Chong was the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, so other than his Master Yue Buqun, he had the most seniority among all the male visitors. Noticing the filthy and tattered clothing he was wearing and the listless face of his, all the guests found themselves puzzled inside. But it was common knowledge that the Martial World did not lack people of strange and unique behaviors. Didn’t elite masters from the Beggars Clan all wear ragged clothing? Since he was the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, he couldn’t have been ordinary; therefore no one had any belittling thought about Linghu Chong.

Linghu Chong was seated at the second table, accompanied by one of the

hosts, Wang Bofen. Soon, the wine had gone around three times. Wang Bofen couldn't help but notice that Linghu Chong had maintained an indifferent face throughout the time, and would only reply once a while to his attempt to make conversations – apparently Linghu Chong didn't really think much of him at all. Then he remembered that earlier in the inn, Linghu Chong didn't even kowtow to them, yet had no problem accepting the present of forty taels of silver. Feeling very displeased, he decided to change the topic to something in regards to martial arts techniques. So he casually asked for Linghu Chong's opinion on several martial arts related questions that were in the advanced level, but Linghu Chong only nodded and agreed, never really answering any of them.

Actually, Linghu Chong didn't have any ill feeling against Wang Bofen at all. It was just that after seeing the luxurious life of the Wang Family, he realized that the difference between his indigence and the wealth of the Wang Family was so dramatic. It was almost like the difference between Heaven and earth. Lin Pingzhi had changed into a long robe made of silk brocade after he came to his grandfather's house. He had a handsome face to start with, so after dressing up, he looked extremely elegant and graceful. Linghu Chong simply couldn't help but feel a sense of inferiority and inadequacy.

"Even if little apprentice sister didn't become a couple with him and stayed the same to me, what future would she have staying with a pauper like me?" he thought.

All his minds focused around Yue Lingshan, so naturally, regardless of what Wang Bofen said to him, nothing really went into his ears.

Enjoying a great fame in the martial arts society around the central region, Wang Bofen had been used to people fawning on him left and right, yet tonight, he kept getting snags from the young man named Linghu Chong. Normally, he would have let his temper loose right at the beginning, but for the sake of his dead sister and the fact that his father had great respect toward the Huashan Sword School, he worked hard to hold his temper down and just kept toasting to Linghu Chong.

Every time when someone toasted Linghu Chong, he would slam down the

wine in his cup without thinking, so before he even knew it, forty cups of wine or so had gone down his throat. He used to have very good tolerance of wine. Even over a hundred cups worth of wine wouldn't have made a difference for him. But because he had lost all his inner energy, his tolerance was reduced quite a bit. And in addition, with a tremendous amount of anxiety gnawing at his heart, each cup of wine seemed to have had a much greater effect on him. By the time he drank up all those forty cups of wine, he was already feeling dizzy.

"This lad doesn't know the ways of the world at all," Wang Bofen thought. "My nephew is your apprentice brother, so you should have called me an Uncle-Master, or simply uncle. It is all right that you didn't call me an uncle, but how dare you ignore me completely like this? Very well! I am going to get you drunk and let you make a fool out of yourself in front of all these guests."

Seeing that Linghu Chong could barely keep his eyes open and was tipsy already, he said with a smile, "Little brother Linghu is the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, and sure enough, he is an outstanding young hero. Not only is his Kung Fu skill extraordinary, his wine tolerance is also extraordinary. Servants! Get rid of the tiny cup. Get Mister Linghu a big bowl and keep it filled!"

The servants cheered and filled Linghu Chong's bowl with wine. Throughout Linghu Chong's life, he had never stopped anyone from pouring wine for him, so as soon as his bowl was filled, he would empty it down his throat. Not long after, he had drunk up another five or six bowls worth of wine. Suddenly, with a wave of his arm, he swept all the plates and cups in front of him off the table.

"Young hero Linghu has had a drop too much! Better drink a cup of hot tea to sober up," guests from the same table all suggested.

"There's no way the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School would get drunk so easily! Little brother Linghu, drink up!" Wang Bofen beamed as he filled Linghu Chong's bowl once again.

"Who…who said I am drunk? Bottoms up!" Linghu Chong replied.

He picked up the wine and started pouring it down with big swallows. Half of

the wine actually ended up dripping down his robe. All of a sudden, his body jerked as he opened his mouth wide and started vomiting, and seconds later, the entire tabletop was covered with "wine" and "dishes" that had been inside his stomach just moments ago. People around the table dodged backward in shock while a smirk ran across Wang Bofen's lips.

Hundreds of pairs of eyes were immediately fixed onto Linghu Chong. Yue Buqun and Madam Yue both frowned, thinking, "This lad really doesn't know how to behave in formal occasions. He has just made a fool of himself in front of so many noble guests."

Lao Denuo and Lin Pingzhi both rushed forward and held Linghu Chong in support.

"Big apprentice brother, why don't I walk you back to rest?" Lin Pingzhi suggested.

"I…I am not drunk. I can drink more. Give me more wine!" Linghu Chong rebuffed.

"Sure! Sure! Someone brings some more wine out," Lin Pingzhi replied.

"You…you…Little Lin, why aren't you spending time with little apprentice sister? What are you dragging me for?" Linghu Chong cast a sidelong and bleary-eyed glance at Lin Pingzhi.

"Big apprentice brother," Lao Denuo said, "let's go take a break. There's a bit crowd here, we've got to watch our mouth."

"Watch my mouth? Humph! Master sent you to keep watch on me. Have you found any proof yet?" Linghu Chong snapped.

Afraid that Linghu Chong could speak anything without thinking in his drunkenness, Lao Denuo held Linghu Chong's arms and pushed him all the way into the guest room at the back with the help from Lin Pingzhi.

Yue Buqun also heard Linghu Chong's words. Even though Yue Buqun was well self-cultivated, he couldn't help but show an annoyed face.

"Little brother Yue," Wang Yuanba soothed, "that was only nonsense from the

mouth of a drunken young lad. Why bother? Come on, let's enjoy our wine!"

"The lad is from the countryside and hasn't had much chance with formal settings. Will you please pardon him, Grandmaster Wang?" Yue Buqun replied with a forced smile.

After the banquet was over, Yue Buqun told Lao Denuo to stop following Linghu Chong around and only watch him in secret.

It was not until the next afternoon before Linghu Chong finally woke up. Remembering none of what he had said the previous day, he found himself with a terrible headache – almost felt as if his head had been cracked open. Taking a look around, he found himself the only occupant of a neat and clean room. He stepped out of the guest room but didn't see any of his apprentice brothers. After inquiring the servants, he learned that they all went to the Training Hall at the backside to swap pointers in martial arts training with the sons and apprentices of the Wang Family.

"Why bother tangle up with them? I'd be better off just take a hike myself," Linghu Chong thought to himself as he stalked out of the gate and off to the street.

Luo Yang had been the capital for many different dynasties. There were many good-sized buildings everywhere, yet the streets weren't very busy. Linghu Chong was not very literate and only had a very limited knowledge about history. Staring at the many historical sites in the city of Luoyang, he had no idea as to what they were and what they were for. Bored stiff, he strolled aimlessly into a small alley. Then something caught his attention. Seven or eight local punks were playing a game of gambling inside a small tavern. Pushing his way through the crowd to the front, he took out the package of the present he had received from Wang Yuanba the previous day. Retrieving the silver out, he joined the game with keen interests. Not until dusk did he finally returned, tipsy from drinking more wine. For the next several days, he kept going back to gamble and drink with the bunch of local punks. In the first couple of days, he had some good luck and won several taels of silver, but by the fourth day, he kept losing, and soon his forty taels of silver were completely cleaned out.

Naturally, the group of punks kicked him out of the game. Feeling quite infuriated, Linghu Chong kept asking for more wine, but after only a couple of kettles of wine were served, the bartender asked.

"Young man, you've lost all your money in the gambling game. How are you going to pay for the wine?"

"Write it under my tab. I'll pay you tomorrow," Linghu Chong replied.

"Our business is very small. We don't give credits to anyone, not even relatives or close friends." The bartender shook his head.

Infuriated, Linghu Chong snarled, "How dare you think I don't have any money!"

"Sorry," the bartender replied with a smirk, "show your money and you'll get your wine! No money, no wine, no credit!"

Linghu Chong glanced over himself. His ragged and tattered clothing certainly didn't help convince the bartender that he might be a wealthy man. Other than the long sword by his waist, he really didn't have anything else that might be worth any money, so he untied the long sword from his waistband and threw it onto the table.

"Take this to the pawnshop!" he said.

Wanting to win more money out from him, one of the punks replied in a rush, "Sure! I'll pawn it for you!" He took the long sword and left.

With that assurance, the bartender took out another two kettles of wine for Linghu Chong. By the time Linghu Chong finished one, the punk had returned with some small pieces of silver.

"It's pawned for three taels and four ounces," the punk said as he gave the silver and the pawn ticket to Linghu Chong.

Linghu Chong weighted the silver in his hand. It didn't even weigh a full three taels, but he didn't complain and went straight back into the gambling game. The game lasted till around dusk when the three taels of silver exchanged hands again – from both losing in the gambling and paying for the wine he drank.

“Hey, loan me three taels of silver. I’ll pay you back double the amount if I win,” Linghu Chong said to a punk named Twitch-Lip Chen.

“What if you lose?” Twitch-Lip Chen asked with a snicker.

“If I lose, I’ll pay you back tomorrow,” Linghu Chong answered.

“How do I know if you have money at home or not? If you lose, how are you going to pay me back? Are you gonna sell your bitch or your sister then?” Twitch-Lip Chen mocked.

Linghu Chong’s anger exploded. He raised his arm and slapped Chen across the face with a backhand. By then, he had consumed a good amount of wine and was already half drunk. Reaching out, he snatched the small pile of silver in front of Twitch-Lip Chen.

“What the hell! This son of a bitch is a mugger,” Twitch-Lip Chen yelled out loud.

The group of punks all came from the same clan, and immediately, they swarmed forward and started throwing punches toward Linghu Chong. Having no sword in his hand and having no strength to defend himself, Linghu Chong was pushed down on the ground. The punks punched and kicked, and within moments, gave Linghu Chong bruises all over his face and his body.

Sounds of hoof beats rose. Several horses came by in short trots.

“Move out of the way! Get lost!” someone on the horseback yelled and whipped his horsewhip to drive away the punks.

Linghu Chong just lay still on the ground face down and couldn’t even get up.

A girl’s voice suddenly cried out, “Isn’t that big apprentice brother?” It was the voice of Yue Lingshan.

“Let me take a look,” another voice answered. It was Lin Pingzhi this time.

Lin Pingzhi dismounted from his horse and then turned Linghu Chong’s body around. “Big apprentice brother? Are you ok?” he cried out in shock as soon as he recognized Linghu Chong’s face.

“I got drunk! And I lost my bets!” Linghu Chong squeezed out a wry smile and shook his head.

In a hurry, Lin Pingzhi propped him up and helped him onto the horseback. Besides Lin Pingzhi and Yue Lingshan, there were four other riders in the pack – they were the two daughters of Wang Bofen and the two sons of Wang Zhongqiang, cousins of Lin Pingzhi. The six of them had set out in the morning to tour around the various temples and historical sites in the city of Luoyang, and were on their way back home after the fun. They certainly didn’t expect to find a Linghu Chong all beat up in the middle of the small alley. All four of them were astounded.

“The Huashan Sword School is a member of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance,” they thought. “When Grandpa mentioned about them, he would always praise dearly. And when we exchanged pointers with them in martial arts a couple of days ago, they did each show outstanding Kung Fu skills. Isn’t this Linghu Chong the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School? How come he couldn’t even overcome several local punks? But if Linghu Chong’s nose was really bleeding so badly, how could this not be true? How odd!”

Returning back to Wang Yuanba’s mansion, Linghu Chong slowly recovered after several days of good rest. Yue Buqun and Madam Yue were both aggravated at the news that Linghu Chong went gambling with some local rascals and went in a fistfight after losing his money, and neither of them paid a visit to him. By the fifth day, Wang Jiaju, the younger son of Wang Zhongqiang, walked in Linghu Chong’s room excitedly.

“Big brother Linghu, I’ve vented the spleen for you today! I gathered up the seven punks who beat you up that day and gave them each some good lashes.”

Linghu Chong didn’t really mind this incident much, so he replied casually, “That’s really not necessary. I got drunk that day, and it was really my fault to start with.”

“Nah, they can’t do that to you. You are a guest of the Golden Blade Wang Family. How can the Golden Blade Wang Family let its guest get beat up in the

city of Luoyang and not get even? If we don't straighten this out, would others still show the same kind of respect to the Golden Blade Wang Family?" Wang Jiaju disagreed.

Deep inside Linghu Chong's heart, he had already disliked the "Golden Blade Wang Family." Now when he heard Wang Jiaju mention the "Golden Blade Wang Family" left and right, as if the "Golden Blade Wang Family" was the most powerful and influential family in the entire Martial World, he couldn't help but mock, "It sure takes the Golden Blade Wang Family to deal with a bunch of punks and rascals."

As soon as the words came out of his mouth, he regretted saying them. Just when he was about to apologize, Wang Jiaju had responded with a stern face.

"Brother Linghu, what are you talking about? If it weren't for my brother and I who drove those seven punks away, would you still be alive today?"

"I do owe the two of you a debt of gratitude for saving my life," Linghu Chong replied with a casual smile.

Wang Jiaju could tell from how Linghu Chong said the words that it was sarcastic and that he didn't mean it at all. Feeling more irritated, he snapped.

"You are the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, yet you couldn't even handle a couple of local punks and rascals in Luoyang. Humph, aren't people going to say that you don't deserve your reputation?"

At this time, Linghu Chong really didn't care about anything. So he replied, "I don't even have a reputation to start with, what's there to deserve or what not?"

"Brother, what are you discussing about with brother Linghu?" a voice rose from outside the door. Then the curtain was lifted and a man walked in. It was Wang Jiajun, the elder son of Wang Zhongqiang.

"Brother, I thought I'd be doing him a favor and help vent his anger, when I gathered up those seven punks, and gave each of them some good lashing. Who would have thought that this Hero Linghu would blame me for interfering?" Wang Jiaju exclaimed angrily.

“Ah, there’s something you don’t know,” Wang Jiajun responded. “I just heard from apprentice sister Yue a moment ago that this brother Linghu is very good at concealing his real abilities. That day outside the monastery of the Buddha of Herb, he blinded fifteen first-class fighters’ eyes with only one swing of his long sword. What brilliant sword art that must have been! Got to be very rare indeed! Ha-ha!” His grin had a sense of mockery. Obviously he didn’t believe a single word from Yue Lingshan.

Wang Jiaju also let out a big grin. “I suppose the martial arts skills of those fifteen first-class fighters must be far from the martial arts skills of the local punks in Luoyang then! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!”

Those words didn’t bother Linghu Chong a bit. He chuckled and then simply sat down on his chair, swaying back and forth gently with his arms around his right knee.

Wang Jiajun was actually sent here by his father and his uncle to interrogate Linghu Chong. Originally, the brothers Wang Bofen and Wang Zhongqiang had told him to try to coax secret using kind words without offending the guest, but seeing the arrogant look on Linghu Chong’s face and how he had treated the two brothers like dirt, he lost his temper.

“Brother Linghu, would you be kind enough to answer a question of mine?” He raised his voice high.

“Certainly,” Linghu Chong answered.

“I heard from cousin Pingzhi that when my uncle and aunt passed away, brother Linghu was the only one there to attend upon,” Wang Jiajun said.

“That’s right.” Linghu Chong nodded.

“Then it was you, brother Linghu, who passed the last words from my uncle and aunt to my cousin Pingzhi?” Wang Jiajun continued.

“Correct,” Linghu Chong replied.

“Then how about my uncle’s ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?” Wang Jiajun pressed on.

At these words, Linghu Chong stood up abruptly. “What did you say?” he yelled loudly.

Worried that Linghu Chong might launch a sudden attack against him, Wang Jiajun took a step back.

“My uncle owned the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ and asked you to give it to my cousin Pingzhi. Why haven’t you given it to him?” he charged.

Hearing such irresponsible calumniation from him, Linghu Chong trembled in rage. “Who…who said that there’s an ‘Evil-Resisting Sword…Sword Manuscript’ for…for me to give to apprentice brother Lin?” he asked with a trembling voice.

“If there isn’t one, why do you look so scared and can’t even talk right? Aren’t you showing a guilty conscience?” Wang Jiajun challenged with a smirk.

“Brothers, I am a guest here in your house. Do these words of yours represent what your father and grandpa think of me, or simply what the two of you think of me?” Linghu Chong asked, working hard to control his temper.

“I am just asking you a casual question. What’s the big deal? It has nothing to do with my grandpa or my dad. But it is well known in the Martial World that the Evil-Resisting Sword Art of the Lin Family in Fuzhou is a very powerful sword art. Since Uncle Lin passed away so abruptly, and the precious ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ that he always carried with him disappeared all of a sudden, as his close relatives, we certainly want to hear about it,” Wang Jiajun replied.

“Little Lin sent you to ask me the question, didn’t he? Why doesn’t he come and ask himself?” Linghu Chong mocked.

“Cousin Pingzhi is your junior apprentice brother. How would he ever dare to ask you?” Wang Jiaju let out some laughs.

“Now with your Luoyang Golden Blade Wang Family backing him up, humph, you sure can force me to talk now. Why don’t you go get Lin Pingzhi now?” Linghu Chong sneered.

“You are the guest of the house. We dare not force you to talk. The two brothers of us are simply curious about it; that’s why we asked the question. If brother Linghu is willing to answer, that would be great. If you do not want to answer, then there’s really nothing we can do about it,” Wang Jiajun said.

Linghu Chong nodded. “I don’t want to answer. There’s nothing you can do about it. Please leave me alone now!”

The Wang brothers gazed at each other in speechless despair. Neither had expected Linghu Chong to be so straightforward and closed the topic so quickly. Wang Jiajun cleared his throat and then tried to start the conversation again.

“Brother Linghu, you blinded fifteen first-class fighters’ eyes with only one thrust of your sword. This move is brilliant. Perhaps you learned it from the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ didn’t you?”

Linghu Chong was dumbfounded. Cold sweats broke out all over his body and his hands trembled. It had all become so clear to him now: “I have been wondering about this for many days. Why didn’t Master, Master-Wife, and the bunch of apprentice brothers and sisters feel grateful that I saved their lives, yet they all became suspicious of me? Now I know! That’s it! So they are all convinced that I embezzled Lin Zhennan’s ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ Since they’ve never seen the Dugu Nine Swords before, and I refuse to let out the secret that Grand Uncle-Master Feng trained me in sword art, when they saw that my sword skills progressed so tremendously, all of a sudden, after spending several months on top of the ‘Cliff of Contemplation,’ they all concluded that I had learned brilliant sword techniques from the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ If that wasn’t the case, where else would I be able to learn such terrific sword arts? It was such a coincident that Grand Uncle-Master Feng showed up and taught me sword arts. No one would ever have expected that. But when the Lin Zhennan couple passed away, I was the only one by their side, so naturally everyone would assume that the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’, the ultimate sword art book that many elite masters would cast greedy eyes on, had fallen into my hands. It is understandable that others would have guessed like that. But Master and Master-Wife have brought me up, and little apprentice

sister is as close to me as a real sister. They all know me well yet didn't trust me on this one. Humph, you have really belittled me!" At that thought, his face naturally showed the expression of indignation.

"I guessed it right, didn't I?" Wang Jiajun said with a triumphant grin on his lips. "Where is the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' then? We are not interested in reading it at all. All we want is to return the manuscript to its rightful owner. Just give the sword art manuscript back to cousin Lin, will you?"

"I've never seen any 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript'." Linghu Chong shook his head. "Chief Master Lin and his wife were taken prisoners, first by the Qingcheng Sword School, then by 'Hunchback of the North' Mu Gaofeng. If he had any sword art manuscript on him, they would have found it first."

"Precisely!" Wang Jiajun immediately followed. "The 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' is so precious. Why would my uncle and aunt carry it everywhere with them? Of course they had hid it in a very secret place, and only before they passed away, they asked you to pass the message on to cousin Pingzhi. Who would have thought…who would have thought that…? Humph!"

"Who would have thought that you would go find it behind everyone's back and embezzled it to be your own!" Wang Jiaju finished the sentence for his brother.

The more Linghu Chong heard, the angrier he became. He really didn't want to argue any more, but since this was a very important matter, he would not want to take the blame for it. So he responded.

"If Chief Master Lin really had such a brilliant sword arts manuscript, he should have become invincible himself. Why couldn't he even defeat a couple of apprentices from the Qingcheng Sword School and was taken prisoner by them?"

"That…that…." Wang Jiaju could not find any answer to that question and became tongue-tied.

Wang Jiajun, on the other hand, had a glib tongue. He argued, "That wasn't unique. Brother Linghu, you learned the Evil-Resisting Sword Art and achieved

outstanding sword skills, yet you couldn't even defeat several punks and rascals and was taken prisoner by them. How are you going to explain that then? Ha-ha, it's called pretending. It's too bad that you have gone a bit too far this time. The Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School couldn't even defend himself against several punks on the Luoyang streets. No one will ever be convinced by this act of yours. And since this is completely impossible, then it must be a trick. Brother Linghu, why don't you listen to my advice and just admit it?"

Under normal circumstances, Linghu Chong would have answered back sarcastically. But what had happened was such a coincidence, which set him right under the spotlight with the most suspicion. He cared nothing about the "Golden Blade Wang Family" or the young Wang brothers, but he couldn't let Master, Master-Wife, and little apprentice sister be suspicious of him.

"I, Linghu Chong, have never seen anything called 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.' What Chief Master Lin from Fuzhou told me before he passed away I have already passed on to apprentice brother Lin without omitting a single word. If I had lied about any part of it, may Heaven cast me down to Hell for eternal suffering and never bring me back," Linghu Chong spoke with a solemn face. He positioned his hands behind his back after those words, his face looking awe-inspiring with ultimate righteousness.

"Did you think you can get yourself off the hook so easily just by swearing a casual oath? We are talking about a serious matter concerning a secret martial arts manuscript here. Did you think everyone is plain stupid?" Wang Jiajun grinned.

"So what's your idea then?" Linghu Chong asked while forcing himself to stay calm.

"Please pardon our boldness, but we'd like to make a body search on you, brother Linghu," Wang Jiaju suggested. He paused for a second and then added with a smirk, "That day when brother Linghu was seized by those seven punks and couldn't move a muscle, they could have searched all over you, couldn't they?"

“You want to make a body search on me? Humph! Are you saying that I am a thief?” Linghu Chong mocked with a sneer.

“We dare not!” Wang Jiajun replied. “Since you stated that you never took the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art,’ why be afraid to let us search you? Once we do a body search on you and there isn’t any sword manuscript on you, you would be cleared from suspicion. Wouldn’t you want that?”

“Fine! Why don’t you go get apprentice brother Lin and apprentice sister Yue, so the two of them can be witnesses?” Linghu Chong nodded his agreement.

But Wang Jiajun didn’t like the idea at all, fearing that as soon as he walked away and left his brother alone with Linghu Chong, Linghu Chong would be able to overpower his brother with ease. But if both of them went together, then of course Linghu Chong would hide the “Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript” and they would have no chance of finding it ever again. So he rejected.

“The search would still be the same. If you aren’t afraid of the search, why use so many excuses?”

Linghu Chong thought to himself, “I agree to let you search my body only because I want to prove my innocence in front of the Master, Master-Wife, and little apprentice sister, the three of them. Whether you believe me or not, what do I care? There’s no way I am going to let your filthy claws touch my body if little apprentice sister weren’t here.” So he shook his head slowly.

“Just the two of you? I am afraid you are not worthy of searching me!”

The more Linghu Chong objected to the search, the more the two Wang brothers were convinced that the “Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript” was hidden on Linghu Chong’s body. If they were able to find the “Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,” then firstly, they would look really good in front of their father and uncle, and secondly, they’ve heard that the “Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript” contained superior sword art techniques, and since they were the ones who found it, Cousin Lin would have no choice but to let them borrow the manuscript and take a look at it. Wang Jiajun had seen with his own eyes the other day that Linghu Chong couldn’t even defend himself when the several

rascals subdued him and gave him a good beating. He concluded that Linghu Chong must be only good with sword techniques, but not hand combat techniques. It would be a perfect opportunity right now when Linghu Chong had no sword in his hands. So he threw a meaningful glance at his brother before speaking to Linghu Chong again.

"Brother Linghu, better not refuse a toast only to drink a forfeit. It's not going to be a pleasant scene if we get on the wrong side of each other."

With those words, the two brothers closed in on Linghu Chong.

Suddenly, Wang Jiaju squared his shoulders and charged forward. Linghu Chong raised his arm to block. "Hey, you hit me!" Wang Jiaju yelled out loud as he locked Linghu Chong's wrist and then pushed down with his elbow. Knowing that Linghu Chong is the Head Apprentice of the Huashan Sword School, not someone to be overlooked, he applied the joint manipulation techniques of the Wang Family with all his strength.

Linghu Chong was an experienced fighter. As soon as he saw Wang Jiaju charging in like that, he knew the opponent was all hostile. He had many different counter attacks in mind with this block. When the opponent locked his wrist, he could have turned his arm over and thrust it down in an angle to launch his counter-attack, but because he had lost all his inner strength and even though he executed the technique the right way, there was no strength behind it. He felt a tingle from the joint on his right arm and then heard a crack. Wang Jiaju had broken his right elbow. Excruciating pain immediately consumed him.

Wang Jiaju was quite ruthless. As soon as he broke Linghu Chong's right arm with a push, he threw a claw hand and dislocated Linghu Chong's shoulder immediately after.

"Brother, quick! Search him!" he shouted.

Kneeling down on Linghu Chong's legs with his left leg to prevent Linghu Chong from throwing any kicks, Wang Jiajun reached into Linghu Chong's chest pocket and began to empty it. Suddenly, his hand came to contact with a thin booklet. He took it out quickly.

“Here it is! Here it is! Here’s Uncle Lin’s ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’!”

The two brothers flipped the booklet open in a rash. There were three words written on the first page in ancient scripts[14] – Smiling Proud Wanderer. The Wang brothers were only roughly literate. If those words had been written in normal script, they would have recognized them. But since they were all in ancient scripts, they had no clue. Flipping to the next page, they saw even stranger symbols and characters all over the page. They didn’t know that those were actually symbols and characters for music scores, and since they had assumed that this was none other than the “Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,” by now, all their suspicious had been cleared away.

“Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript! Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript!” the two brothers shouted in unison.

“Let’s show it to Father,” Wang Jiajun suggested. He took the booklet and ran out.

“You shameless thief!” Wang Jiaju cursed as he kicked Linghu Chong in the waist heavily. After spitting on Linghu Chong’s face, he also ran out of the room.

At first, Linghu Chong felt as if his chest was going to explode from the unbearable fury. But then he thought, “Those two brats are simply idiots. Their grandfather and father can’t be so stupid. When they find out that this is only a music score, for sure they would come to apologize.” Waves of pain came from his dislocated shoulder and elbow. He couldn’t help but groan. “I’ve lost all my inner strength, and can’t even defend myself against punks and rascals off the street. I am a good-for-nothing now. What’s the point of staying alive in this world, then?”

He lay on the bed, sweating in pain. Tears streamed down as he grieved over himself. But remembering that the Wang brothers must be returning soon, he wiped off his tears so that he wouldn’t show a sign of weakness.

After a long while, sound of footsteps rose. The Wang brothers rushed back in a hurry.

“Go see my grandpa,” Wang Jiajun said with a sneer.

“No way!” Linghu Chong rebuffed angrily. “Your grandpa should have come here to apologize to me. Why should I go see him?”

The Wang brothers burst into loud laughter.

“My grandpa apologizes to you? Dream on! Let’s go!” Wang Jiaju scoffed.

The two brothers grabbed onto Linghu Chong’s robe, picked him off the bed, and carried him out.

“Your Golden Blade Wang Family still calls yourself chivalrous? You are arrogant and conceited, despicable and shameless,” Linghu Chong cursed.

Wang Jiajun slapped Linghu Chong with a backhand, which bruised Linghu Chong’s face and blood started dripping down his lips. But Linghu Chong kept on cursing while the Wang brothers carried him all the way into the Back Hall.

Wang Yuanba and the Yue Buqun couple had been waiting in the Back Hall. Wang Bofen and Wang Zhongqiang also sat by Wang Yuanba. But that didn’t keep Linghu Chong from spilling profanities non-stop.

“Golden Blade Wang Family, what a shameless and contemptible family. I’ve never seen a family so low and dirty in the entire Martial World!”

“Chong, shut up!” Yue Buqun yelled with a stern face.

Hearing his Master’s rebuke, Linghu Chong finally stopped cursing, but he still glared at Wang Yuanba with angry eyes.

Holding the music score booklet in his hand, Wang Yuanba asked casually, “Nephew Linghu, where did you get this ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?”

Raising his head high, Linghu Chong laughed out loud.

“Chong, when a senior asks you a question, you answer to the best knowledge of yours. How dare you to be so rude? Where are you manners?” Yue Buqun admonished.

“Master,” Linghu Chong answered, “because of my internal wounds, I have no strength left in me. And look how those two brats have treated me? Humph, is

this how a guest should be treated?”

“Our Wang Family would never dare offend a good friend or a noble guest,” Wang Zhongqiang replied. “But you have failed the trust from a dying man and pocketed the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ to be your own. That’s the act of a thief. The Golden Blade Wang Family in Luoyang is an honest family. How can we still treat you like a friend?”

“All three generations of your Wang Family keep on saying that this is the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ Have you ever seen the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ before? How are you so sure that this is the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?” Linghu Chong challenged.

Wang Zhongqiang dazed for a second before replying, “This booklet was found on you, and apprentice brother Yue also confirmed that this is not a martial arts manuscript of the Huashan Sword School, then how can it not be the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?”

Fuming with anger, Linghu Chong couldn’t help but laugh. “If you claim that this is the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ then ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ it is! I wish your Golden Blade Wang Family will have a wonderful time learning the techniques and master the invincible sword arts. From now on, your Wang Family in Luoyang can be called the Ultimate Blade and Sword! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!”

“Nephew Linghu,” Wang Yuanba said, “please don’t take offense on what my grandchildren did to you. Everyone makes mistakes. As long as one will admit his mistake and correct himself, he will still be treated with respect. Since you have already given out the sword arts manuscript, just for the sake of your Master, I will not investigate any further. Starting from today, no one will ever mention this incident again. Why don’t I put your dislocated shoulder and elbow back, first.” At that word, he stood up and walked toward Linghu Chong and reached for Linghu Chong’s left hand.

“Hold it! I don’t need you to play up to me,” Linghu Chong snapped, taking two abrupt steps back.

“What playing up to you?” Wang Yuanba was stunned.

“I am not a puppet. So you just break my arm when you feel like it and put it back when you change your mind?” Linghu Chong growled. He walked a few steps to the left until he was in front of Madam Yue and then called out, “Master-Wife!”

Madam Yue heaved a sigh and then put his dislocated joints back to place.

“Master-Wife, this clearly is a music score booklet for zither and flute. These people of the Wang Family are totally illiterate and insist on saying that it is the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ What a big joke!” Linghu Chong explained.

“Grandmaster Wang, is it alright if I take a look at this booklet?” Madam Yue said to Wang Yuanba.

“Ah, here you go, Madam Yue.” Wang Yuanba handed the booklet over.

After flipping through several pages and browsing through, Madam Yue herself had no clue as to what this booklet was about.

“I can’t read music scores myself, though I have seen sword art manuscripts before. This booklet really doesn’t look like a sword art manuscript. Grandmaster Wang, is there anyone in your house that knows how to play zither or flute? We might as well ask him to take a look, then we would know for sure,” Madam Yue suggested.

Wang Yuanba hesitated, afraid that if this really were just a music score booklet, how embarrassing it would be. So he didn’t answer right away. Wang Jiaju, on the other hand, was a total blockhead, and shouted in a loud voice.

“Grandpa, our accountant, Mr. Yi can play the flute. We can ask him to take a look at this. This clearly is the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ How can it be a music score booklet?”

“There are many types of martial arts manuscripts. Some people would intentionally write martial arts formulas or techniques in the form of a music score in order to keep it a secret so others wouldn’t be able to pry about. That’s not at all surprising,” Wang Yuanba immediately added.

“If this mister in your house knows how to play the flute, then he would be able to tell if this really is a sword arts manuscript or a music score for flute,” Madam Yue insisted.

Having no other choice, Wang Yuanba asked Wang Jiaju to get Mr. Yi, the accountant of the house. Soon he came back together with Mr. Yi.

Mr. Yi was a thin and short man in his fifties. He had a sparse goatee on his chin, but his clothing looked neat and clean.

“Mr. Yi, will you please take a look at this booklet and tell us if it’s an ordinary zither score or flute score?” Wang Yuanba asked.

Mr. Yi opened the zither portion of the booklet and glanced over a couple of pages. “Sorry, I don’t know much about this part.” He shook his head.

He quickly skimmed to the flute portion of the booklet, and suddenly his eyes brightened as he started humming along the music score in a low voice and drumming two of his fingers on the table simultaneously. After a while, he shook his head again.

“This can’t be right!”

He continued humming alone, but suddenly the pitch of his voice went very high, and only seconds later, it dropped very low.

“This is impossible! Well…well…I really don’t understand this,” he muttered with a frown.

“Is there anything suspicious about this booklet? Is it very different from an ordinary music score?” Wang Yuba asked with a happy face.

“Oh Master, please look here.” Mr. Yi pointed at the flute score. “This is the Gong major[15] here, but it suddenly turned into the Wei minor. That’s totally against musical theories, and it would be impossible for a flute to play. Then from here it suddenly turned into the Jiao major. That’s something I’ve never seen before. It’s simply impossible to play such music using a flute.”

“Humph, you don’t know how to play it doesn’t mean others don’t know how to play it!” Linghu Chong sneered.

“You’re absolutely right!” Mr. Yi nodded. “But if someone is able to play music like this, I would sincerely admire him from the very bottom of my heart! Certainly the very bottom of my heart! Unless…unless it is he in the East Town….”

“You said that this is no ordinary flute score, and some of the tones are impossible to play using a flute, right?” Wang Yuanba cut him off.

“Ah, yes! Definitely not ordinary! Definitely not ordinary! I will never be able to play something like that. Unless it is he in the East Town….” Mr. Yi nodded.

“Which great musician in the East Town can play this music?” Madam Yue asked.

“Well…I can’t guarantee it, but…but there’s this Elder Bamboo-Green from the East Town who can play both the zither and the flute,” Mr. Yi answered. “Maybe he can play it. His skills in playing the flute are way better than mine. Way better indeed! We are not even talking about the same league here! Certainly not the same league!”

“If this is no ordinary music score for flute, then there must be more behind it,” Wang Yuanba said.

Wang Bofen had been listening quietly by the side. He suddenly cut in, “Father, isn’t the Four Ways Six Harmonies Knife Form of the Eight Diagrams Knife Dojo in Zhengzhou also recorded in a music score?”

Wang Yuanba immediately understood. He knew that his son was just making things up. The family of the Eight Diagrams Knife Dojo Head Master, Mo Xing, had been in-laws with the Wang Family for generations. Their Dojo didn’t have anything named the Four Ways Six Harmonies Knife Form. But he figured that since the Huashan Sword School only focused in sword arts, whether another school had this knife form or not, Yue Buqun most probably wouldn’t have known, even though Yue Buqun had good knowledge of the Martial World. So he nodded.

“That’s right! That’s right! In-law Mo certainly mentioned about it several years back. Recording knife arts or sword arts in music scores is nothing

unusual at all."

"Since it's nothing unusual at all, then would you, Grandmaster Wang, enlighten me and tell me what exactly are recorded in these two music scores?" Linghu Chong asked with a smirk.

"That…Alas, my son-in-law had passed away, therefore, other than you, I am afraid there's not another one who would be able to understand the secret in the music score." Wang Yuanba heaved a long sigh.

If Linghu Chong had wanted to plead innocent, he could have simply told the origin of the "Smiling Proud Wanderer" music score, but then inevitably, he would have to mention about how the Hengshan Sword School's Great Mr. Mo had killed Great Songyang Palm Fei Bin, and that would certainly bring severe consequences; also, once Master found out that the music score was really related to the Demon Cult Elder Qu Yang, for sure Master would have it destroyed right away, then he would not be able to fulfill his promise to the dead. With these in his mind, he held his anger and responded calmly.

"Since this Mr. Yi mentioned that there's an Elder Bamboo-Green who is an expert in music, why don't we take the music score over to let him examine it?"

"That Elder Bamboo-Green is a weirdo who acts like a mad man. How can we believe any word out of his mouth?" Wang Yuanba shook his head.

"But we must get to the bottom of this matter," Madam Yue replied. "Chong is our apprentice and Pingzhi is also our apprentice. We can't grant favor to either side. To find out who's right and who's wrong, we might as well ask that Elder Bamboo-Green to give a judgment." She didn't want to say that this was a dispute between Linghu Chong and the Golden Blade Wang Family, so she conveniently replaced the Wang Family with Lin Pingzhi.

"Mr. Yi, would you please send a wagon for this Elder Bamboo-Green?" Madam Yue requested.

"Well, this old gentleman is a very eccentric folk. When people ask him for favors, if it's something that he doesn't care, he won't pay any attention to it even if you kowtow to him at his door. But if he decides to intervene, you can't

even push him away," Mr. Yi replied.

"That sounds just like us martial people," Madam Yue nodded. "I suppose this Elder Bamboo-Green must be a senior master in the martial arts society. Senior apprentice brother, we have certainly been really ignorant."

"That Elder Bamboo-Green is merely a craftsman skilled in making baskets and floor mats with bamboo strips. He is no martial master," Wang Yuanba replied with a smirk. "He plays the zither and the flute well and also paints pictures of bamboos. Many people buy his paintings. He is just an old craftsman posing as a lover of art, and does attract a certain local crowd."

"It would be a pity if we don't pay a visit to such a figure while we are in Luoyang. Grandmaster Wang, would you please be kind enough to accompany us and pay a visit to such an elegant craftsman?" Madam Yue asked.

Seeing that Madam Yue was quite determined to go, Wang Yuanba had to agree. So led by Mr. Yi, Wang Yuanba, his sons and grandsons set out for the East Town with the Yue Buqun couple, Linghu Chong, Lin Pingzhi, Yue Lingshan, and other Huashan apprentices.

The group went through several small streets and came upon a very narrow alley. A large bush of bamboos occupied the end of the ally. Swaying gently in the breeze, they set an elegant tone to the surroundings. As soon as the group stepped into the alley, dim sound of zither play echoed in their ears pleasantly – someone was playing a song. The alley appeared to be so refreshing and peaceful that it almost seemed as if this was an entirely different world totally isolated from the crowded city outside.

"This Elder Bamboo-Green certainly knows how to enjoy life!" Madam Yue whispered.

Suddenly, a clank echoed as one of the zither strings snapped, and the zither play halted abruptly.

"Respectful guests have arrived at my humble shack. Is there something you want to see me about?" an old voice rose from inside.

“Elder, we have this odd zither and flute music score. Would you be kind enough to examine it for us?” Mr. Yi announced.

“You have a zither and flute music score and want me to examine it? Ha-ha, you really flatter an old craftsman,” Elder Bamboo-Green answered.

Before Mr. Yi even had a chance to respond, Wang Jiaju had already shouted out, “Grandmaster Wang from the Gold Blade Wang Family is here to visit.”

He had thought that because his grandfather was a very important figure in the city of Luoyang, as soon as he mentioned his grandfather’s name, the old craftsman would for sure rush out to greet them, but all he got in return were Elder Bamboo-Green’s sneers.

“Golden Blade or Silver Blade, it’s no better than the old craftsman’s rusty iron blade. An old craftsman doesn’t need to visit Master Wang, and there’s no need for Master Wang to visit an old craftsman, either.”

Wang Jiaju was infuriated. “Grandpa, this old craftsman is a moron with no manners. We don’t need to see him. Let’s go home,” he said loudly.

“Since we are already here, we might as well ask Elder Bamboo-Green to take a look at the music score,” Madam Yue insisted.

“Hmm!” Wang Yuanba snorted as he handed the music score booklet to Mr. Yi, who, in turn, took the booklet and walked behind the bush of bamboos.

“You can put it down here,” Elder Bamboo-Green’s voice rose from inside.

“Elder, is this a real music score or some kind of secret martial arts manuscript with formulas and techniques written in disguise in the form of a music score?” Mr. Yi asked.

“Secret martial arts manuscripts? Are you out of your mind? Of course this is a music score!” Elder Bamboo-Green reproached, and moments later, sound of zither rose again, graceful and pleasant.

Linghu Chong listened to the music and soon remembered the melody – the same melody Liu Zhengfeng had played that day. The music was the same, but the previous player had long perished. Linghu Chong couldn’t help but feel

mournful.

Not far into the music, the pitch of the zither sound suddenly went higher and higher until it almost sounded like a shrill whistle. Clank, one of the zither strings snapped. And as the sound went even higher, another clank echoed when another string snapped. Elder Bamboo-Green uttered a cry of surprise.

“This zither score is really odd. I don’t understand.”

Wang Yuanba and his two sons and two grandsons exchanged looks among themselves, all looking content and triumphant.

“Let me try the flute score,” Elder Bamboo-Green muttered, and soon the sound of a flute rose from behind the bamboo bush.

At the beginning, the flute sounded melodious and pleasant, depicting a romantic scene. But then the pitches of the flute sound turned lower and lower till it was almost impossible to recognize. And after several more notes, the sound became hoarse, and turned into very unpleasant noises.

Elder Bamboo-Green heaved a sigh. “Little brother Yi, you play the flute yourself. Don’t you know it’s impossible to play anything with such a low pitch? The zither score and the flute score aren’t necessarily fakes, but the composer is certainly being deliberately mystifying, and perhaps is playing jokes on us. Why don’t you go home first and let me ponder over this a bit more?”

“Sure!” Mr. Yi answered and then walked out from behind the bamboo bush.

“Where’s the sword arts manuscript?” Wang Zhongqiang asked.

“Sword arts manuscript? Oh, Elder Bamboo-Green wants to keep it for a while so he can ponder over it some more,” Mr. Yi answered.

“Go get it back, quick! This is an invaluable sword arts manuscript. Do you have any idea how many people in the Martial World want to get their hands onto this? How can we leave it in the hands of someone totally irrelevant?” Wang Zhongqiang admonished hurriedly.

“Ah, alright!” Mr. Yi replied and turned around to head back toward the back of the bamboo bush, again, when Elder Bamboo-Green’s voice suddenly rose

again.

"Auntie, why have you come out?"

"How old is the Elder Bamboo-Green?" Wang Yuanba asked in a whisper.

"In his seventies. Close to eighty years old I guess," Mr. Yi answered.

"If an eighty-year old man still called her his auntie, then this old granny had to be at least a hundred years old," everybody thought of the same thing.

A woman's voice acknowledged with a muffled "hmm."

"Auntie, please take a look at this. This music score is very strange," Elder Bamboo-Green explained.

The woman acknowledged again with a muffled "hmm." Then sound of strings being plucked rose. Apparently someone was tuning the zither. Then it fell quiet for a moment as the snapped strings were probably being replaced with new ones. After some more tuning sounds, the granny started playing. At the beginning, it sounded the same as how Elder Bamboo-Green had played. Then the pitch of the zither sound went higher and higher, but this time it somehow transformed into a higher scale smoothly and pleasantly as if it were never difficult to start with.

Linghu Chong was half surprised and half joyous. He could vaguely remember that this was exactly the same melody he had heard Qu Yang play that night. The melody sometimes sounded impassionate and moving yet sometimes turned elegant and gentle. Although Linghu Chong didn't know anything about music, he could still tell that the artistic conception this granny had interpreted was quite different from what Qu Yang had interpreted, even though they were playing the exact same melody. The granny's play sounded placid and gentle, making the listeners truly appreciate the exquisiteness of good music, but it lacked the exciting surges Qu Yang's play was able to bring out. After a long while, the music gradually slowed down as if the music was drifting further and further away, and the zither player had slowly walked away, hundreds of feet, and then miles away. The notes became so subtle that it simply faded into the gentle breeze.

Just when the sound of the zither was about to fade away, a couple of very low and delicate flute sounds rose next to the sound of the zither. The sweet sound of the flute circled in the air and turned louder and louder, as if the flute player had walked closer and closer, while playing the flute continuously. The sound was clear and melodious, sometimes high and sometimes low, sometimes gentle and sometimes loud. When everyone thought that the sound was already at its lowest, after some twirls, it would turn even lower. Although subtle and mild to the extreme, every syllable was still clearly recognizable.

Gradually, some high-pitched notes would occasionally break out from the low-pitched melody, like pearls falling into a jade plate and bounced back and forth, short and brisk, as one fell down, another one would bounce back. Then more and more sounds joined and echoed each other. First, it was like a spring streaming down the mountain path, echoing as the little waves splashed over the narrow banks. Then it turned into a garden full of colorful flowers, each blossoming so vividly in a competition to earn a glance from the dancing butterfly. There was also the choir from the many kinds of birds, echoing each other here and there, praising the efforts of the various blossoms, and singing joyously about the beauty of the season. Then gradually, the many birds flew away one after another as the spring season quietly stepped away and the petals from the withered blossoms swirled in the air, performing their sad dance falling toward the ground. Then the rain came, which painted everything in a color of gloom and made the leaves rustle. It was now cold and dreary and lifeless. All there left was the drizzle now, so tiny that no one could tell when it went from on to off and then from off to on again. And finally, everything fell into an ultimate silence.

Only a long while after the flute had stopped playing did everyone realize the silence. All felt as if they had just come out of a dream. Although Wang Yuanba, Yue Buqun and the many others didn’t know much about music, they all found themselves deeply intoxicated by the magic of the music. And Mr. Yi simply froze there in a trance, as if his soul had faded together with the music and was no longer inside his body.

Madam Yue heaved a sigh in great admiration. “Admirable! Very admirable! Chong, what’s the name of the music?”

“It’s called the ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer’ song,” Linghu Chong answered. “This granny has such incredible skills, and it is even rarer that someone could have such supreme skills in both zither and flute.”

“The composer certainly did a fantastic job writing the music, but it sure takes someone like this granny with such superb skills to be able to bring the best out of it. It must be the first time for you to listen to such wonderful melody,” Madam Yue remarked.

“Actually, no! Last time when I heard it, it sounded even more spectacular,” Linghu Chong replied.

“Really? How can there be anyone with even better zither and flute skills than that granny?” Madam Yue asked in surprise.

“Not necessarily better than this granny. But when I heard such wonderful music the last time, there were two players. One played the zither and the other one played the flute, and they were also playing this ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer’ song….”

Before he even finished his sentence, three plucking sounds came from behind the bamboo bush as the granny whispered something in a very low voice. Vaguely, it sounded like that she had said, “Zither and flute playing together? Where can I ever find the other one?”

Elder Bamboo-Green’s voice rose again, loud and clear. “Mr. Yi, this is indeed a music score. My auntie has just played it. You can take it back now.”

“Yes.” Mr. Yi replied. He stepped behind the bamboo bush and soon returned, holding the music score booklet with both hands.

“Such fine work of art as this one recorded in the booklet is very rare and very hard to come by. Such wonder should never fall into the hands of vulgar people. And you should never have the wishful thinking of studying this music piece recklessly. It would only cause you more harm than gain,” Elder Bamboo-

Green added.

“Yes, yes! I would never even dare!” Mr. Yi replied sincerely, and then handed the music score booklet back to Wang Yuanba.

Wang Yuanba had heard the spectacular performance himself and knew that it couldn’t have been a fake. Returning the booklet back to Linghu Chong, he said in an awkward tone,

“Nephew Linghu, we are truly very sorry!”

Linghu Chong answered with a sneer and was just about to add some satirical words when he saw Madam Yue shaking her head at him, so he swallowed them back down.

Feeling so embarrassed, Wang Yuanba, his two sons, and the two grandsons left before everyone else. Yue Buqun and the many apprentices also followed. But Linghu Chong remained. Holding the music score booklet in his hands, he stood there like a statue.

“Chong, aren’t you going back now?” Madam Yue asked.

“I just want to stay here a bit longer,” Linghu Chong answered.

“Don’t be too late. Go back and take a good rest. Oh, be careful with your arms. They were dislocated pretty badly. Don’t try anything heavy.” Madam Yue exhorted.

“I got it!” Linghu Chong replied.

After the group left, the small alley was quiet, once again. The only occasional sound breaking the silence were the rustling of the bamboo leaves in the gentle breeze. Staring at the music score in his hands, Linghu Chong remembered how Liu Zhengfeng and Qu Yang had performed the music together in that late night.

“The two of them were so lucky to have found their intimate friendship in each other and composed such a wonderful piece together,” he thought to himself. “Even though the granny behind the bamboo bush has incredible skills in playing both the zither and the flute, she could only play the two parts separately. The Elder Bamboo-Green couldn’t play the music together with her.

Maybe this “Smiling Proud Wanderer” song written for a zither and a flute to play together would perish forever and I would never have the opportunity to hear it ever again.”

His mind fell blank for a little while before he thought again, “Uncle-Master Liu and Elder Qu, one was a senior master of the Chivalrous Side while the other was an Elder of the Demon Cult. One represented righteousness while the other one represented evil. They should have been completely irreconcilable. But when they talked music to each other, they could feel each other’s heart and ended up becoming bosom friends. They were also able to compose such a magnificent and spectacular piece of ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer’ song together. When the two of them left this world together, hand in hand, there were really no regrets in their hearts. That was so much better than what I have to endure right now, living a lonely life in this world, suspected by my Master, forsaken by my little apprentice sister, while the only apprentice brother who respected me and loved me died in my own hands.” His heart was swelled by grief and sorrow. Tears ran across his cheeks and dripped onto the music score booklet. Linghu Chong couldn’t help but choke with sobs.

Elder Bamboo-Green’s voice came from behind the bamboo bush again, “Friend, may I ask why you are crying?”

“Oh, I just grieved about my own life experiences besides remembering how the two senior masters, who composed this music piece, passed away. I must have forgotten myself. I am so sorry. It’s my fault that I have disturbed your peace,” Linghu Chong answered. After these words, he turned around to leave.

“Little friend, would you please step in here and have a word with an old man? I’d like to consult you on a few questions,” Elder Bamboo-Green invited.

That caught Linghu Chong in a bit of surprise. He had seen the arrogant attitude the Elder Bamboo-Green put on display toward Wang Yuanba, and didn’t expect such courtesy toward him, a nobody, at all.

“You flatter me. Anything Elder wishes to ask about, I will answer to the best of my knowledge,” he answered, and then walked through the bush of bamboo.

What came to his eyes were five small cabins, two on the left, and three on the right, all made out of thick bamboo poles. An old man strolled out from a cabin on the left with a bright smile on his face.

“Little friend, please come in and join me for some tea.”

Linghu Chong took a good look at the Elder Bamboo-Green. The old man’s back was a little bit hunchbacked. His head was almost bald. All there left were patches of sparse hair. He had big hands and big feet, yet looking hale and hearty.

“Linghu Chong here pays his respect to an elder.” Linghu Chong bowed to salute.

“I’ve only wasted more years of my life. That’s all. Come in! Come in! Make yourself at home.” Elder Bamboo-Green smiled.

Linghu Chong followed him into the small cabin. The furniture inside was all made out of bamboos. A painting of a bamboo bush hung by the wall. The strokes in the painting flowed freely. Together with the many dripping ink spots in shape of bamboo leaves, the bamboo bush looked thick and dense. A zither and a flute lay on the table.

Elder Bamboo-Green poured out some dark green tea from a pottery teapot and filled a bowl. “Please have some tea,” he invited.

Linghu Chong took the tea bowl with both hands and bowed slightly.

“Little friend, would you be kind enough to tell me how you ended up with this music score booklet?” Elder Bamboo-Green asked.

At those words, Linghu Chong’s heart skipped a beat. The story of the music score contained many secrets. That was why he didn’t even tell his Master and Master-Wife. But that day when Liu Zhengfeng and Qu Yang gave him the music score, they had intended to leave this music piece behind so it would not perish with them. The Elder Bamboo-Green and his aunt both had excellent understanding of music, and furthermore, his aunt had shown superior skills and understanding in the music piece. The two of them were quite old, but other

than these two, where in the world would he be able to find a third one who would be worthy of receiving this music score? Even though there might be someone else in the world that would be an expert in music, since Linghu Chong wouldn't be living for long, the chances of find that person would be very slim. With these thoughts, Linghu Chong pondered over it for a short while and then answered,

"The two senior masters who composed this music piece, one had superior skills in playing the zither, and the other one had excellent skills in playing the flute. The two of them became bosom friends and wrote this music piece together. But it was so unfortunate that disaster came upon them and they left the world at the same time. Right before they passed away, the two senior masters gave the music score to me and asked me to find the right person to pass it onto, so the music piece would not perish together with them." He paused for a second and then continued. "Earlier, when I heard Elder's aunt demonstrating her superior skills in both zither and flute, I was so relieved that I've finally met the destined owner of this music score booklet. Elder, please take the music score booklet and give it to the granny, so I can fulfill my promise to the two composers and comfort their souls in the underworld." At that word, he held the music score up with both of his hands respectfully.

But Elder Bamboo-Green didn't take it. "Please allow me to ask my auntie first," he said. "I don't know if she is willing to accept it."

The granny's voice rose from the little cabin on the left, "Mister Linghu is too kind to have presented us with such a wonderful gift, showing his vast generosity. It would be disrespectful to decline yet embarrassing to accept. Would you be kind enough to enlighten us with the names of those two senior masters who composed this excellent piece?" Strangely, her voice didn't sound old in any way.

"Certainly," Linghu Chong answered. "The two senior masters who wrote this, one was Uncle-Master Liu Zhengfeng, and the other one was Elder Qu Yang."

The granny uttered a cry of surprise. "So it was them," she murmured.

“Do you know them?” Linghu Chong asked.

The granny didn’t answer his question and kept her silence instead. Only after a good while, she spoke again.

“Liu Zhengfeng was an elite master in the Hengshan Sword School, but Qu Yang was an Elder of the Demon Cult. The two sides have been bitter enemies for generations. What had made them compose this piece together? I am really lost now.”

Even though Linghu Chong hadn’t even met the granny face to face, from her performance of the zither and flute, he was already convinced that she was an old, kind, and wise lady aloof from any of the worldly affairs, someone who would never lie to him or sell him out. If she was able to tell who Liu and Qu were, then obviously she was a fellow martial arts master. So he told her everything from the beginning to the end truthfully: how Liu Zhengfeng planned to quit at the Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony, how Chief Zuo of the Songshan Sword School sent his Command Flag to stop the event, how Liu and Qu were hit by Songshan School elite fighter’s palm strike, how they performed the music together in the remote valley, and how the two asked him to find the right person to pass on the music piece before they passed away. The only thing he omitted was the part when Great Mr. Mo slain Fei Bin.

The granny listened quietly. After Linghu Chong finished telling the story, she asked, “This is clearly a music score. Why did Golden Blade Wang Yuanba claim that it was a martial arts manuscript?”

Linghu Chong then told the part about how the Lin Zhennan couple was fatally wounded by the Qingcheng Sword School and Yu Canghai, how they had asked him to take their last words to Lin Pingzhi, and how the Wang brothers suspected him and *etc.*

“I see,” the granny responded. “You could have told your Master and Master-Wife everything, the reasons and causes. Wouldn’t that have saved you a lot of trouble and kept all these meaningless suspicions off your back? I am only a stranger. Why have you told me everything without reservation?” she inquired

again after a short pause.

"I don't quite understand it myself. I guess it's because I was deeply moved by your high demeanor after listening to your graceful performance and didn't feel suspicious about you," Linghu Chong answered sincerely.

"Then are you saying that you actually felt suspicious about your Master and Master-Wife?" the granny asked.

Linghu Chong felt a shock in his heart. "I dare not. It's only that…in my Master's heart, he suspects me a great deal. Alas, I can't really blame that on my respectful Master."

"From the sound of your voice, I can tell that you lack a solid foundation of inner strength. That shouldn't have happened to a young man in your age. Why's that? Have you recently fallen seriously ill or gotten wounded badly?"

"I did get wounded badly."

"Nephew Bamboo-Green, will you please bring this young man to my window so I can check his pulses?"

"Sure!" Elder Bamboo-Green answered. He led Linghu Chong to the window by the little cabin on the left side, and then asked him to put his left hand into the window through the window screen made out of thin bamboo sections. Inside the bamboo screen there was another layer of thin gauze. Linghu Chong could only vaguely see the shape of a person, but none of the face. Then he felt three ice-cold fingers touching his wrist. The granny started checking his pulse.[16] But only a short moment later, she cried out in surprise.

"This is very odd!" A few moments passed before she spoke again, "Your right hand please."

After the checking was completed, she fell into dead silence.

"Senior master, there's no need to worry about me. I know my life won't last for too long. I really don't give much thought about it," Linghu Chong said with a slight smile.

"Why are you saying that your life won't last long?" the granny asked.

“I accidentally killed my junior apprentice brother and also lost my Master’s ‘Divine Art of the Violet Twilight Manuscript.’ I only hope that I will be able to find the manuscript soon to return it to my Master. After that, I will commit suicide in exchange for my apprentice brother’s forgiveness.”

“Divine Art of the Violet Twilight Manuscript? That’s nothing extraordinary. How did you accidentally kill your apprentice brother?”

Linghu Chong then told the story about how the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies tried to heal his wounds, how the six energy streams clashed and smashed against each other inside him, how his little apprentice sister stole Master’s invaluable manuscript for him to heal himself, how he refused to read it and apprentice brother Lu Dayou decided to read for him against his will, how he sealed Lu Dayou’s acupoints, and how he must have used too much strength in sealing those acupoints and got Lu Dayou killed.

“Your apprentice brother didn’t die off your hands,” the granny concluded after listening to the entire story.

“He didn’t die off my hands?” Linghu Chong was stunned.

“Your inner strength was not pure. Just by sealing those two acupoints, you wouldn’t be able to kill him. Somebody else killed your apprentice brother,” the granny said firmly.

“Who killed apprentice brother Lu, then?” Linghu Chong murmured.

“It’s not necessary that the one who stole the manuscript is the murderer, himself, but at least the two must have some kind of connection,” the granny said.

Linghu Chong heaved out a deep breath, feeling so relieved as if a huge rock had just been removed from his chest. He had asked himself the same question before. How could he have killed Lu Dayou by jabbing his two acupoints so lightly? But deep in his heart he had always thought that even if Lu Dayou wasn’t killed from his jabs, Lu still died for his sake. How can a true man shirk responsibility, shift the blame onto others, and find excuses for himself? During the past many days, he had seen again and again the intimate relationship

between Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi. Out of disappointment and despair, he had really lost his will to live. There was only one thing on his mind, and that was to die and leave this world once and for all. But now when the granny reminded him, anger swelled in his heart.

"Revenge! Revenge! I must seek revenge for apprentice brother Lu!" he thought to himself

"You said that there were six energy streams clashing inside you, but based on what I read from your pulse, there seemed to have eight energy streams. May I ask why?" the granny asked.

In loud laughter, Linghu Chong told her how Monk No Commandment had worked on mending his wounds as well.

"You have a sanguine disposition. Even though your pulses are in disorder, they showed no sign of prostration. Would you care to listen to another zither music?" the granny suggested.

"You are too kind. I truly appreciate it," Linghu Chong replied.

Soon, music rose again, but this time the melody was ultimately mild and tender, like the sound of a slight sigh, the tender petals of blossoms moistened by the silent morning dews, or the morning breeze, stroking the many hanging twigs of the willow tree. Not long into it, Linghu Chong felt as if his eyelids had grown heavier and heavier. He kept reminding himself, "I can't doze off. I am listening to a senior master playing the zither. If I doze off, that would be so disrespectful." But as hard as he tried to stay focused, the drowsiness simply was irresistible. Before long, his eyes were closed. He lay on the ground and fell asleep. Even in his sleep, the soft and gentle music echoed vaguely in his dreams. It almost felt as if a gentle hand was caressing his hair with love and caring, and he had gone back to his childhood, resting in Master-Wife's arms, and enjoying her tender affection. A good while passed before the sound of the zither finally quieted down. Waking up abruptly, Linghu Chong stood up hurriedly, looking very embarrassed.

"Oh, no! I am so sorry that I was so impolite to have fallen asleep while

listening to your wonderful play! This is so embarrassing," he muttered.

"Don't blame yourself. I intentionally played that music to lull you into sleep, hoping the music would be able to put the energy streams inside you in order. Why don't you try to channel your inner strength and see if the feeling of nausea has lessened?" the granny suggested.

"Many thanks!" Linghu Chong replied.

Feeling very delighted, he sat down on the ground with his legs crossed and started to channel his inner energy. He could feel that those eight energy streams still charged about inside him, clashing against each other, but that strong feeling of nausea at his chest did lessen quite a bit. He worked some more, trying to gather some inner strength, but only felt dizzier and dizzier. Suddenly, his body collapsed to the side. Elder Bamboo-Green hurried forth to prop him up and then walked him back inside the cabin.

"The Peach Valley's Six Fairies and Great Master No Commandment all had resourceful inner energy. The energy streams they planted are too strong to be messed with from my shallow music play. I am very sorry to have put you through more pain and suffering," the granny apologized.

"You are being too modest. I have already benefited tremendously from listening to this song," Linghu Chong replied in a hurry.

Elder Bamboo-Green picked up a writing brush. Dipping it in the black ink, he wrote on a piece of paper, "Ask about learning this song and benefit all your life."

Linghu Chong immediately came to realization. "May I be bold enough to ask the senior master to teach me this song, so I can slowly improve my injury by myself?" he asked.

Elder Bamboo-Green nodded, looking very pleased.

The granny did not answer right away. After a moment of pause, she finally asked, "How are your zither skills? Will you please play a song?"

Linghu Chong blushed. "I have never learned how to play the zither before. I

really know nothing about it. It was such a bold request for me to have even thought about learning the superior skills from you, senior master! Please excuse my presumptuous head."

"I'd better get going now," he bowed deeply toward Elder Bamboo-Green.

"Please wait. It is embarrassing that we couldn't repay the great generosity you have shown by giving us the wonderful music. It also troubles me deeply that your wounds are too severe to be cured. Nephew Bamboo-Green, you can start teaching Mister Linghu how to play the zither tomorrow. If he has enough patience and can stay in Luoyang for a period of time, then…then I might as well teach him this 'Song of Peace and Serenity'." In the last several words, her voice almost turned into a whisper, hard to pick up.

In the early morning the next day Linghu Chong came to the small cabin in the small alley for his first zither lesson. Elder Bamboo-Green took out a brown-ended zither made from the trunk of a phoenix tree and started to teach Linghu Chong basic music theories.

"There are a total of twelve majors. They are Huang-Zhong, Da-Lv, Tai-Cu, Jia-Zhong, Gu-Xi, Zhong-Lv, Rui-Bin, Lin-Zhong, Yi-Ze, Nan-Lv, Wu-Yi, and Ying-Zhong. These all came from the ancient times. Legend has it that many years ago, Huang Di[17] commanded Lin Lun to create scales, and Lin Lun was inspired by phoenix's singing, thus creating the twelve majors. A zither has seven strings and can play Gong, Shang, Jia, Wei, and Yu the five scales. The first string plays the Huang-Zhong major, and the third string plays the Gong scale. The five tones are Man-Jiao, Qing-Shang, Gong-Diao, Man-Gong, and Rui-Bin." He went ahead and started explaining every single one of them in details.

Although Linghu Chong had no prior knowledge of any kind about music theories, because of his natural gift, he picked everything up in a very fast pace. Very satisfied with his progress, Elder Bamboo-Green started to teach him the fingering techniques, and also taught him a short song named "Vivid Sky Melody." Linghu Chong followed the song several times and then played it on his own. Even though he missed several notes and his fingering looked jerky,

the music depicted a good picture of the vast blue sky, cloudless and spacious. The granny listened in the cabin next to it. When he had finished playing, she let out a gentle sigh.

"Young Master Linghu, you have shown great talent in learning the zither. Perhaps it wouldn't be long before you can start learning the 'Song of Peace and Serenity'."

"Auntie," Elder Bamboo-Green said, "today is only little brother Linghu's first lesson in music, yet when he played the 'Vivid Sky Melody,' he was already able to portray a much better imagery than I could. Sound of the zither came directly from one's heart. I guess the reason is because he is very broad-minded indeed."

"Granny, you really flatter me," Linghu Chong replied. "I wonder when the day will come when I will be able to play the 'Smiling Proud Wanderer' song the way you did."

"You…you want to play the 'Smiling Proud Wanderer' song?" the granny uttered.

"After hearing senior master's graceful performance yesterday, I felt great admiration. But of course it's just my wishful thinking. Even master Bamboo-Green couldn't play it, and I am far from that." Linghu Chong blushed in embarrassment.

The granny fell quiet. After a long while, she finally murmured in a very low voice, "If you can play the zither part, of course that would be great…." Her voice fell lower and lower, and then a tender sigh followed.

For the following twenty some days, Linghu Chong would always come to the bamboo cabin in the small alley to take his zither lessons and stay till dusk before leaving. He ate all his lunches at Elder Bamboo-Green's place. Though it consisted only simple vegetables and tofu, he enjoyed it a lot more than the expensive dishes that were served in the Wang Family, especially when there were also great wines to go with the lunches everyday. Elder Bamboo-Green didn't have a great wine tolerance, but all the wine he stored were cream of the crop. He had a great knowledge about wines. Not only did he know the origins

of every kind of wines, he was also able to tell the place the wine was made and the year it was made with a single sip. Linghu Chong had never heard of the many things about wine before. So he not only learned how to play the zither, but also a great deal about wines from Elder Bamboo-Green. He sometimes even felt that the theories related to wines were as deep as theories of sword arts or zither play.

Several times when Elder Bamboo-Green went out to sell handicraft arts made out of bamboos, the granny would then give him lessons behind the bamboo made screen. As days went by, many of Linghu Chong's questions regarding the zither play were so advanced that even Elder Bamboo-Green didn't know the answer and the granny had to answer them, herself.

But Linghu Chong never had a chance to see the granny's face. Her voice sounded gentle and tender, as if it was the voice of a young girl from a rich family, nothing like the voice of an elderly granny living a poor life in a shabby alley. He figured that it was probably because she had been continuously nurtured by classical music since her young age, and that was why her voice remained pleasant, just like the pleasing music she played, even in her old age.

One day, the granny taught Linghu Chong a new song named "Affectionate Thoughts." This was an ancient song from the Han Dynasty with a very sweet and melodious tone. Linghu Chong first listened to the granny playing it several times, and then tried it himself. As the music went on, unconsciously, many memories flashed by his mind. He remembered when Yue Lingshan was still a child many years ago, how the two of them, as a pair of innocent playmates, shared so much joy and fun together. He also remembered the warm affection little apprentice sister had shown when she practiced sword arts in the waterfall with him and when she brought dinners up the "Cliff of Contemplation" for him. Then, out of nowhere, Lin Pingzhi came, and how the little apprentice sister became colder and colder toward him. Grief swelled in his heart as he played on. Suddenly, the tone changed into something else, and out came the melody of a Fujian folk song – it was none other than the folk song Yue Lingshan had sung that day when she walked down the cliff. In shock, he

immediately stopped playing.

"You were doing a good job playing this 'Affectionate Thoughts' with much affection and good understanding of the meaning behind it. I guess you must have remembered some past events while you played. But may I ask why the tone suddenly turned into the kind of melody from the Fujian region and sounded almost like a folk song?" the granny asked in a mild tone.

Linghu Chong had always been a man of a sanguine disposition, and this was something that had smoldered in his heart for months. Feeling very grateful about how the granny had treated him so warmly and kindly for the last twenty some days, he simply couldn't hide it to himself any longer and spilled out all about his bitter love toward Yue Lingshan. Once he started telling the story, he could no longer restrain himself, and ended up telling everything from the beginning to the end without any reservation, as if the granny had become his grandmother, or mother, or a sister. By the time he finally finished telling his story, he felt greatly embarrassed.

"Granny," he apologized, "sorry that I just babbled on and on with these meaningless things. That is so…so…."

"Fate cannot be imposed upon. Like the old saying says, 'Everyone has his own fate, so don't envy others.' Young Master Linghu, although you've lost your present love, it is not to say that you won't find your soul mate another day," the granny replied in a gentle voice.

"I don't even know how many days I still have left in this world. I guess having a family of my own will never be my concern," Linghu Chong said loudly.

The granny did not speak another word. Sounds of zither rose again; she started playing the "Song of Peace and Serenity." Only minutes into it, Linghu Chong almost fell asleep again.

The granny stopped playing. "From now on, I will start teaching you this song. It probably will take ten days to learn the entire song. Then you can play the song every day. Even though your inner strength won't be fully recovered,

more or less, it will be somewhat beneficial for you."

"Yes," Linghu Chong answered.

From that day, the granny began teaching Linghu Chong the music score and the fingering techniques. Linghu Chong put in good efforts in memorizing everything, and four days soon went by.

By the morning of the fifth day, when Linghu Chong was just about to head out to take zither lessons in the small alley, Lao Denuo walked to him in a hurry.

"Big apprentice brother, Master has given his order. We will be leaving here tomorrow."

"We are leaving tomorrow? I…I…." Linghu Chong was taken by surprise. He had wanted to say that he hadn't finished learning the zither song, but he swallowed the words back.

"Master-Wife asked you to start packing. We will be setting out in the early morning," Lao Denuo added.

Nodding his acknowledgement, Linghu Chong came to the bamboo cabin in a trot.

"I will be leaving Luoyang tomorrow," he said to the granny.

The granny was taken by surprise. After a good while of silence, she finally said gently, "Why are you in such a hurry? You…you haven't finished learning the song yet."

"I was thinking about the same thing. But this is the Master's order. Besides, we are only guests in a foreign town. We can't really live long in someone else's house," Linghu Chong answered.

"That's true," the granny answered.

That day, the granny taught Linghu Chong some more music score and fingering techniques no different from any other day.

In the many days spent together with the granny, even though Linghu Chong never saw her face, from the sound of her zither play and the dialogues between

the two, he could tell that she had great care for him as if he was a member of her family. Only that she was not the kind who liked to show her enthusiasm, so occasionally when her words showed some affection, she would immediately mix it up with other things, apparently not wanting him to catch it. In this world, it used to be the Yue Buqun couple, Yue Lingshan, and Lu Dayou those four who cared the most for him, but by now Lu Dayou had passed away, Yue Lingshan cared for Lin Pingzhi whole-heartedly, instead, and Master and Master-Wife both were suspicious of him, so he naturally felt that the Elder Bamboo-Green and the granny were the closest to him. During the day, for several times he had wanted to tell Elder Bamboo-Green that he would like to stay in the small alley, studying zither and flute and also the craftsmanship instead of going back to the Huashan Sword School. But as soon as he remembered the lovely face of Yue Lingshan, he would drop the thought, not able to bare the idea of parting with his dear little apprentice sister.

"Even if the little apprentice sister stopped talking to me, all I want is to see her once everyday. I would be happy even with just a view from her back or the sound of her few words, let alone the fact that she never stopped talking to me."

Dusk came, and it was time for farewell. Reluctant to leave Elder Bamboo-Green and the granny, Linghu Chong walked next to the window of the granny's cabin and knelt down to salute. Vaguely he could see that behind the bamboo screen, the granny also knelt down to salute back.

"I have taught you zither skills to repay the great favor you have granted us by giving us the music score. Young Master Linghu, why are you saluting me in such a serious manner?" the granny's voice rose from inside the cabin.

"After our parting today, who knows when I would have the pleasure to listen to senior master's elegant and magnificent performance? As long as I am still alive, I promise that I would come back to Luoyang once again and pay a visit to Elder and Granny," Linghu Chong replied.

Suddenly a thought came to his mind, "The two of them are already in their final days. Who knows how many years more would they be able to last? By the time I come back to Luoyang again, they'd probably be gone from this world.

Alas, life is almost like a dream, hard to tell what's real and what's illusory. It is also like a morning dewdrop, so insignificant, so pretty, yet so brief." At those thoughts, he choked with sobs.

"Young Master Linghu, at the moment of parting, I have an advice for you," the granny said.

"Yes, please bestow your wisdom upon me. I will keep it to my heart," Linghu Chong answered.

But for a long while, the granny kept her silence. After another long while, she finally spoke again in her gentle voice, "Ominous, the Martial World is. Do take good care!"

"I got it!" Linghu Chong replied as a feeling of sadness swelled in his heart.

He bowed his farewell to Elder Bamboo-Green as sound of zither rose again from the small cabin on the left, and the music played was none other than that ancient tone – "Affectionate Thoughts."

The next day, Yue Buqun and the rest of the group bid their farewell to Wang Yuanba and his two sons. The plan was to go north by boat following the Luo River. Wang Yuanba, his two sons, and his two grandsons came all the way to the wharf to see their guest off. Servants brought onto the boat trays of silver ingots piled high – presents from the Wang Family as travel expenses. A sumptuous feast was also catered along the pier for the farewell party.

Ever since that day when the Wang Jiajun and Wang Jiaju brothers broke Linghu Chong's arms, Linghu Chong never spoke to any one in the Wang Family ever again. At the moment of parting, he simply turned the whites of his eyes up and stared blankly toward the five members of the Wang Family as if the "Wang Family" didn't even exist.

Yue Buqun almost got a headache because of this Head Apprentice of his. He knew that Linghu Chong was a stubborn young man. If he had forced Linghu Chong to salute Wang Yuanba for the farewell, at the current moment, he probably would bend to Master's order and give in, but afterwards, he would most probably cause a great deal of trouble for the Wang Family and create

many disturbances. That was why he thanked Wang Yuanba again and again, himself, and pretended that he didn't see the rude expression on Linghu Chong's face.

Linghu Chong glanced over the crowd by the side with cold shoulder. Boxes and packages of presents were brought onboard, and a good number of them were specifically for Yue Lingshan. One after another maids walked aboard the boat and presented the presents to Yue Lingshan.

"Here are some cookies and candies for Miss Yue from Granny Wang. These are some dresses for Miss Yue to wear on the road from Madam Wang and some jewelry for Miss Yue to wear from the other Madam Wang…." It almost seemed as if Yue Lingshan was a family member of the Wang Family.

Yue Lingshan thanked again and again happily with a big smile across her face. "Wow! I don't think I can eat that much. That's too many dresses for me!"

An old man in shabby clothing suddenly walked aboard amid the exciting crowd. "Young Master Linghu," he called out.

Seeing that the old man was none other than the Elder Bamboo-Green, Linghu Chong was taken by surprise. He immediately stepped forth to greet him.

"My auntie asked me to give this small present to Young Master Linghu." Elder Bamboo-Green raised his arms and presented a long package wrapped in a piece of blue coarse cloth in white flower patterns. Linghu Chong bowed and then took the package.

"Many thanks to the senior master! I am truly grateful!" He bowed again.

The Wang Jiajun and Wang Jiaju brothers caught the entire scene in their eyes. Seeing how Linghu Chong didn't even bother to cast a glimpse to the famous Unbeatable Golden Blade Grandmaster Wang, yet showed such deep respect to an old folk in shabby clothing, they couldn't help but feel enraged. If it hadn't for the sake of the Yue Buqun couple and the many apprentice brothers and sisters of the Huashan Sword School, they would have dragged Linghu Chong out and give him a good beating to vent their spleen. When they saw Elder Bamboo-Green step onto the gangboard from the bow to get back ashore after

giving Linghu Chong the package, they gave each other a meaningful glance and then jostled toward the old man with their shoulders abruptly from both sides, thinking that just a slight bump would have sent the old folk falling down into the Luo River. Although the water was quite shallow near the shore and wouldn't drown the old man, at least it would make Linghu Chong lose a great deal of face.

"Watch out!" seeing what was going on, Linghu Chong called out in a hurry.

He was just about to reach out and grab the two brothers when he suddenly remembered that he didn't have any inner strength left in him to go with the grab. He wouldn't be able to grab onto them anyway. Even if he did get his hands onto the Wang brothers, it would be useless just the same. Within seconds, the Wang brother had bumped into Elder Bamboo-Green.

"Don't!" Wang Yuanba shouted out.

Wang Yuanba knew clearly that he was very different from ordinary martial people, for he had a big family and lots of properties in the city of Luoyang. His two grandsons were both young and vigorous. If this old and feeble folk had died because of the jostle, there would be endless trouble when the law enforcement began their investigation. But since he was sitting inside the cabin talking to Yue Buqun at the time, it was already too late for him to stop them.

A loud thud rose as the two shoulders from the two brothers bumped squarely onto Elder Bamboo-Green. All of a sudden, two figures flew in the air. Immediately followed were two loud splashes – the Wang brothers had fallen into the Luo River one from each side of the gangboard. It almost seemed as if the old man was a big leather bag filled with air, and when the two Wang brothers bumped into it, they simply bounced right back. The old man kept his slow pace and went tottering off the gangboard onto the bank as if nothing had happened.

As soon as the Wang brothers fell into the river, the crowd aboard the boat broke into chaos. Several sailors jumped into the river in a hurry and dragged the two out of the water. It was still early in the spring. Even though all the ice in

the river had melted, the river was still icy cold. Neither of the Wang brothers knew how to swim, so they both drank a good mouthful of water. Their teeth shuddering non-stop, both of the brothers found themselves in a very embarrassing situation.

In shock, Wang Yuanba checked his two grandsons, but what he saw astounded him even more. The four arms of the two brothers were all dislocated at the shoulder joints and elbow joints, which looked exactly the same as how they had broke Linghu Chong's arms the other day. Their arms hanging by their sides, the two brothers still spilled out streams of abuses wildly.

Seeing what had happened to his two sons, Wang Zhongqiang leapt off the boat onto the bank and blocked Elder Bamboo-Green's way. But Elder Bamboo-Green still kept his slow pace, his back arched, his head bending low.

"Who are you? Are you here to make trouble for the Wang Family in Luoyang?" Wang Zhongqiang yelled.

Elder Bamboo-Green kept walking as if he had not heard anything. Slowly, he came closer and closer toward Wang Zhongqiang.

Everyone aboard the boat had their eyes fixed on the two as Elder Bamboo-Green stepped closer and closer to Wang Zhongqiang, who extended his arms slightly out and blocked in the middle of the road. Gradually, the distance between the two shortened, from ten feet to five feet, and then from five feet to three feet.

As Elder Bamboo-Green took another step forward, Wang Zhongqiang yelled, "Enough!" He reached out with his two hands and smacked them down at Elder Bamboo-Green's back in claw hands. Just when his fingers were about to touch Elder Bamboo-Green's back, all of a sudden, his giant body flew in the air for tens of feet. Amid the gasps and screams of the crowd, he did a back flip in the air and then landed on the ground steadily.

When two persons ran toward each other in high speed, it would not be surprising if one of them flew in the air like this from the colliding force. But what seemed very strange was the fact that Wang Zhongqiang stood still while

Elder Bamboo-Green closed in on him very slowly yet was still able to send him flying in the air from the colliding force. Even elite fighters like Yue Buqun or Wang Yuanba had no clue as what techniques the old man used to bump people into flying in the air like that.

Since Wang Zhongqiang landed so steadily without any sign of sore straits, people in the crowd who didn't know any martial arts skills actually thought that he had leapt up all by himself to show off his Qing-Gong. The many servants and chairmen put their hands together and cheered happily. Many couldn't wait to start praising the superb martial arts skills Master Wang had just put on display.

Wang Yuanba had been greatly surprised when he had found out that the Elder Bamboo-Green dislocated his two grandsons' arms so easily in a bump without even batting an eyelid. He figured that he could achieve the same effect himself, but it would have been very forceful and overwhelming, never as subtle as the way the old man did it, and never as swift either. By the time he saw his son sent into the air from the bump, it was no longer surprise in his heart but rather terror. He knew very well that this second son of his had mastered all of his skills and techniques. Not only could he wield a saber in an unruffled yet fierce manner, his skills in fighting barehanded and his accomplishment in inner energy were also very adequate, no less than what he himself had achieved in his prime of life. But before the two even exchanged one move, his son had already been knocked flying in the air. That was something he had never seen in his life. Noticing that his son wanted to run back for a fight after the setback, he called out immediately.

"Zhongqiang, come here!"

Wang Zhongqiang turned around and leapt back onboard. Spitting on the floor angrily, he cussed resentfully, "What a stinking, old rascal! He probably knows some kind of witchcraft!"

"How do you feel? Any injuries?" Wang Yuanba asked in a whisper.

Wang Zhongqiang shook his head.

Wang Yuanba pondered upon the situation, but only concluded that it was likely that he still lacked enough skills to take on this old man. And if he asked Yue Buqun to fight the old man together with him, it would be no glory winning the fight. So the best way out probably would be pretending that nothing had happened and just get on with it. The old man did show some mercy by not wounding his son or throwing his son off balance. That had already saved him from losing face. He watched the Elder Bamboo-Green slowly walking away, his heart filled with some kind of indescribable discomfort.

"This old man, of course, is a friend of Linghu Chong," he thought to himself, "and because my grandsons broke Linghu Chong's two arms, he came to get even by breaking their arms. I have ruled the martial arts society in the Luoyang region for all my life. Could it be possible that I am destined to fall hard in my old age?"

By then Wang Bofen had put his two nephews' dislocated parts back in place. Two sedan chairs carried the two dripping wet young men back to their home.

"Mr. Yue, do you know who he is? I am so dim-sighted from my old age. I couldn't tell who that elite was at all," Wang Yuanba glanced at Yue Buqun and asked.

"Chong, who is he?" Yue Buqun asked.

"He is Elder Bamboo-Green," Linghu Chong answered.

Wang Yuanba and Yue Buqun both uttered a cry of surprise. Even though they both went to that small alley the other day, neither of them had a chance to meet Elder Bamboo-Green face to face. And it just happened that the only one who would be able to recognize Elder Bamboo-Green, Mr. Yi, decided to see the guests off at the gate of the Wang house instead of coming to the wharf. That was why no one had a clue as who this old man was.

"What did he give you?" Pointing at the package wrapped in blue cloth, Yue Buqun asked.

"I haven't opened it yet," Linghu Chong answered.

He opened the package and found a short zither inside. The zither's body looked ancient and obsolete. Obviously, the zither was an invaluable antique. Two characters "Yan Yu" in ancient script were calved on the tail of the zither. Inside the package was also a booklet with the words "Song of Peace and Serenity" written on the cover. Feelings of gratitude swelled Linghu Chong's heart. He couldn't help but let out a cry of joy.

"What?" Yue Buqun stared at him and asked.

"This senior master not only gave me a zither, but also copied down the entire music score for me," Linghu Chong explained.

He turned the booklet open and flipped through it. Every page was filled with beautiful calligraphy in small fonts. Not only were there words and symbols recording the music tone, there were also a great deal of notes and comments explaining in detail about the fingering techniques and various keynotes about zither play in general. The papers and the ink prints all looked new, apparently, the granny had just hand printed the entire booklet. Deeply moved by the granny's affectionate love and care, Linghu Chong found tears rolling in his eyes.

Wang Yuanba and Yue Buqun saw with their own eyes that the booklet only contained techniques relating to zither play, and some of the strange characters and symbols were indeed similar to the ones inside the "Smiling Proud Wanderer" music score booklet. Although there were still many suspicions in their hearts, they had nothing else to add.

"A true master never reveals his abilities unless necessary. Who would have thought that this Elder Bamboo-Green is actually an elite in the Martial World? Chong, do you know which school or clan he is from?" Yue Buqun asked. He had figured that even if Linghu Chong did know the answer, he would still not tell the truth, but he asked anyway, for it disturbed him very much to not know any details about such an elite fighter with such superb Kung Fu skills.

Not to his surprise, Linghu Chong answered, "I only studied zither from this senior master. I didn't even know he had martial arts skills."

After Yue Buqun and Madam Yue bid their farewell to Wang Yuanba and the Wang Bofen, Wang Zhongqiang brothers, the boat set sail toward the north, and soon were hundreds of feet away from ashore. The many apprentices soon engaged each other into a hearted discussion. Some were convinced that Elder Bamboo-Green had unusually superb Kung Fu skills while some others believed that nothing could prove that the old man had great skills, the young Wang brothers only fell into the river because of their recklessness, and Wang Zhongqiang only leapt away because he didn't want to take the old man up on it.

Linghu Chong sat at the back of the boat to read the music score by himself, having no interest listening to the discussion among his junior apprentice brothers and sisters. Following the directions from the booklet, he lay his finger on the strings and felt the keys. Afraid to disturb his Master and Master-Wife, he only practiced the positioning and didn't really make any sound.

The boat was heading in the same direction as the wind and the wave, thus gained some good speed. Madam Yue walked to the bow and tried to enjoy the scenery, but that didn't help her get rid of the image of the odd looking Elder Bamboo-Green in her head at all. Many disquieting thoughts surged in her mind when suddenly, her husband's voice rose next to her ear.

"What do you think of that Elder Bamboo-Green?"

This question was the exact same one she had wanted to ask her husband, so even though he had asked it first, she still asked, "What do you think of him?"

"That old man's technique was so unusual and strange. Without even moving his arms or legs, he was still able to knock the three members of the Wang Family flying far in the air. I'd have to say that his techniques aren't from any orthodox school," Yue Buqun answered.

"But he seems to be very nice to Chong, and it didn't look like he was intentionally making trouble for the Golden Blade Wang Family," Madam Yue remarked.

"I hope this is the end of it. Or else, the great reputation Grandmaster Wang had built up throughout his life might be at the very brink of ruin." Yue Buqun

heaved a sigh. He paused for a good while before speaking again, “Even though we are continuing our journey by water now, it is still wise to be cautious.”

“Are you saying that someone might come aboard to make trouble?” Madam Yue inquired.

Yue Buqun shook his head. “We are still kept in the dark. We still have no idea who those fifteen masked assassins are and where they came from. We are in the light while our enemy is still in the dark. Our journey might not be as peaceful as we’d like it to be.”

Ever since Yue Buqun became the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, he had never experienced any serious setbacks until recently. But in the last couple of months, he had realized there was a good chance that many difficulties were awaiting them in the road ahead. But who was the enemy, and what did the enemy want? He couldn’t find an answer. Just because of this clueless feeling he was laden with more and more anxiety.

That day, the Yue couple urged their apprentices again and again to be on good guard days and nights, but as time went by, their boat entered the main river from near the Zigong County and then headed east following the flow of the river; not even one accident happened. The further away they were from Luoyang, the more relaxed each one became. And before long, their vigilance gradually slacked away.

Chapter 14: Wine Cups

Translated by Lanny Lin



Zu Qianqiu reached into his pocket and took out a wine cup. Smooth and soft, it was actually a white jade cup. He reached in again, and went on taking out more and more wine cups

People in Kaifeng started among the Yue Buqun couple and their apprentices.

“Even though Kaifeng is a big city, there’s not a great deal of interest in martial arts around here. And for people like old Escort Hua, senior Master Hai, or the Three Elites of Henan, they have neither truly outstanding martial arts skills nor

great fame. Let's just tour around some of the scenic spots and historical sites. We can skip visiting anyone or any studios so we won't disturb anyone," Yue Buqun suggested.

"But senior apprentice brother, have you forgotten that very famous figure in the city of Kaifeng?" Madam Yue grinned.

"A very famous figure? Who…who are you referring to?" Yue Buqun asked.

""Cure one and kill one; kill one then cure one. Cure as many as I kill; that shows my skill.' Now who's that?" Madam Yue gave a hint.

"Aha, you are talking about the 'Killer Doctor' Ping One-Finger. He is indeed very famous. But he's so eccentric that he most probably wouldn't want to see us even if we paid him a visit," Yue Buqun said with a smile.

"That's true. Or else we could have asked this Killer Doctor to take a look at Chong's injuries since Chong's inner wounds are not getting any better and we just happen to be coming to Kaifeng anyway," Madam Yue agreed.

"Mom, what does the nickname Killer Doctor mean? If he is a killer, how can he be a famous doctor?" Yue Lingshan asked in curiosity.

"Well, this Doctor Ping is a weirdo…well…a strange fellow in the Martial World. He has profound medical knowledge and his magical hands can bring the dying back to life. It is said that regardless of how ill or how badly wounded the patient is, so long as he agrees to work on him the patient will be cured for sure. But he has this very odd rule. He says that God of Heaven and Lord of Underworld, of course, both know how many people are there in this world. If he cured too many people so that less people die, there would be too many living and too few dead. Certainly the Lord of Underworld is not going to be too fond of that. And when his final days come, even if the Lord of Underworld leaves him alone, his officers and goblins would for sure get even with him, therefore, his days in the underworld probably are not going to be easy at all," Madam Yue explained with a light grin.

Quite amused by these words, all the apprentices giggled.

“That’s why he made an oath,” Madam Yue continued, “that so long as he cures someone, he must kill another one to even the numbers. And if he kills someone, he must cure another one to make up. He put up this big banner right in his office, which said clearly, ‘Cure one and kill one; kill one then cure one. Cure as many as I kill; that shows my skill.’ He says that because of this practice, the God of Heaven wouldn’t fault him for taking away lives, and Lord of Underworld wouldn’t blame him for taking over his business either.”

The entire audience burst into loud laughter.

“What a funny guy this Doctor Ping One-Finger is! But why does he have such a strange name? Has he only one finger?” Yue Lingshan asked.

“I think he has more than just one finger,” Madam Yue answered. “Senior apprentice brother, do you know why he picked such a name?” she asked her husband.

“Doctor Ping has all ten fingers. He called himself One-Finger because either to kill or to cure, he only needs one finger to do it. If he wants to kill someone, he just hits him with one finger, and if he wants to cure someone, he only uses one finger to check pulses,” Yue Buqun clarified.

“Oh, I see. Then I suppose he must be an expert in sealing acupoints,” Madam Yue remarked.

“That I am not too sure. There probably isn’t that many who has fought this Doctor Ping before. Everyone in the Martial World knows how good of a doctor he is. In one’s life, who can say that he is immune to unexpected misfortunes? Maybe one day he will need to ask for Doctor Ping’s help, that’s why no one wants to offend Doctor Ping. But unless it’s absolutely necessary, no one would just rashly ask for his help either,” Yue Buqun said.

“Why’s that?” Yue Lingshan couldn’t help but ask.

“Because whenever a fellow martial person asks him to cure a wound or disease, he would make this person swear an oath ahead of time that after the person is cured, he must obey Dr. Ping’s order to kill a person Dr. Ping specifies. This is called one life in exchange for another. It’s easier if the person

is asked to kill someone totally unrelated to himself, but if he is asked to kill someone who's a close friend of his, or even his father, brother, wife, or son, then wouldn't it be real difficult?" Yue Buqun explained.

"This Doctor Ping is truly odd!" the apprentices remarked.

"Big apprentice brother, in that case, you can't really ask him to work on you then," Yue Lingshan concluded.

Linghu Chong had been propping against the door at the backside, listening to Master and Master-Wife discussing the peculiarity of the "Killer Doctor" Ping One-Finger. When he heard little apprentice sister's words, he replied with a slight smile on his cheeks.

"That's right! I would be very afraid if he asks me to kill my little apprentice sister, once he cures me."

That brought loud laughter out from the rest of the apprentices.

Yue Lingshan also grinned. "This Doctor Ping has no grudge against me. Why would he ask you to kill me?" She turned her head and asked her father, "Dad, then is this Doctor Ping a good guy or a bad guy?"

"Well, it is said that he is quite grumpy, and always do things to his liking, sometimes chivalrous and sometimes irregular. He is really neither a good guy nor a bad guy. To say it nicely, he is a strange genius. But in plain words, he would be a freak," Yue Buqun answered.

"Here's what I think. Many of the rumors flowing around the Martial World are really exaggerations, and this might just be one of them. When we get to the city of Kaifeng, I'd like to go pay a visit to this Doctor Ping," Yue Lingshan responded.

"Nonsense! Don't be mischievous!" Both Yue Buqun and Madam Yue admonished almost in unison.

Seeing the solemn expression on her parents' faces, Yue Lingshan was slightly stunned. "Why?" she asked.

"Meeting people like this? Are you out of your mind? Trouble will come

looking for you if you do," Yue Buqun reproached.

"Why would trouble come looking for me just for a visit? I am not asking him to cure me. What's the big deal?" Yue Lingshan mumbled.

"We are here to enjoy visiting scenes, not to cause troubles." Yue Buqun pulled a long face.

Seeing how angry her father had become, Yue Lingshan dared not speak another word. But her curiosity toward this "Killer Doctor Ping One-Finger" only grew bigger and bigger.

At early morning the next day, the boat entered the city limits of Kaifeng. But it was still quite a distance from the real city.

"Guess what?" Yue Buqun smiled a big grin. "There's this place not far from here where a member of our Yue family once became the center of the limelight many years ago. We'd better pay a visit there."

"Yay! I know! I know! It's Zhuxian Town, where General Yue, Yue Pengju,[18] kicked Jin Wushu's[19] behind big time," Yue Lingshan cheered.

Yue Fei, who fought the Jin army and defended China, was a heroic figure all martial people admired deeply in their hearts, and Zhuxian Town was the place where Yue Fei had completely crushed the Jin army. Naturally, everyone in the group wanted to check it out.

"Hurry up! Let's go to the Zhuxian Town first. Then we'll have lunch inside the city of Kaifeng," Yue Lingshan leapt ashore ahead of everyone else and shouted.

The passengers started walking off the boat except Linghu Chong who remained sitting by the backside of the boat.

"Big apprentice brother, aren't you going?" Yue Lingshan asked.

Ever since Linghu Chong had lost all his inner energy, he often felt weary and tired and didn't want to move much. He figured that since everybody else was going ashore to have fun, it would be the perfect opportunity for him to learn

that “Song of Peace and Serenity.” Besides, seeing how Lin Pingzhi stood side by side with Yue Lingshan, looking intimate and affectionate, he felt even more uncomfortable.

“I am too tired. I won’t be able to keep up with you guys,” he answered.

“Alright, have a good rest then. I’ll get you some good wine from the city of Kaifeng,” Yue Lingshan replied.

Sorrow swelled Linghu Chong’s heart as he watched Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi walk away abreast, leading the way ahead of everyone else.

“Even if learning the ‘Song of Peace and Serenity’ could really cure my internal wounds, why would I bother to cure and why would I bother to learn the music?” he thought to himself.

Staring at the muddy waves of the Yellow River surging east continuously, he suddenly felt that life’s pain and suffering were really no different from the flowing river – both would come wave after wave and never stop. The thought triggered a disruption in his inner energy flow. An immense pain from his lower abdomen immediately consumed him.

Meanwhile, Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi certainly were in a completely different mood. Walking side by side, whispering in each other’s ears, the two were having a wonderful time.

“Lingshan and Pingzhi are both still young. A man and a woman walking together like this might be all right in the countryside, but it certainly wouldn’t be appropriate in a big city. Why don’t we give them some company?” Madam Yue gave her husband a pull on the sleeve and whispered.

“We are no longer young. I guess it would be totally appropriate for us to walk together then,” Yue Buqun joked.

Madam Yue let out a smile and then caught up with Yue Lingshan in quick paces. The four of them asked their way from pedestrians and then headed straight toward the Zhuxian Town. Just when they were about to enter the Zhuxian Town, a big shrine by the roadside caught their attention. The sign on

top of the shrine had four words in golden paint, “Shrine of General Yang.”

“Dad, I know this one. This is the shrine for General Yang Zai-Xing.[20] He went to River Shang by mistake and was killed by the Jin archers,” Yue Lingshan said.

“Correct! General Yang died defending his country. That is something that deserves great respect and admiration. Let’s go in the shrine to pay our respects to the spirit of a martyr,” Yue Buqun replied.

At the time, the many apprentices were still far behind, so the four of them decided to go inside without waiting for the rest of the group. A statue of Yang Zai-Xing occupied the middle of the shrine. The man in the statue had a white face and wore a set of silver-colored armor, looking very heroic.

“This General Yang is so handsome!” Yue Lingshan thought to herself. She couldn’t help but turn around and cast a glance at Lin Pingzhi to compare Lin Pingzhi with the statue in her heart.

Suddenly a voice came from outside the shrine.

“I bet you this Shrine of General Yang is built for Yang Zai-Xing.”

Recognizing the voice, both Yue Buqun and Madam Yue immediately grabbed onto the hilts of their swords and their faces turned pale.

Then another voice rose, “There are many generals named Yang. How can you be so sure that this is Yang Zai-Xing? Why can’t he be Golden Blade Grandpa Yang,[21] or even Yang the Sixth[22] or Yang the Seventh?”[23]

“Just within the Yang Family Corp, there are many possibilities. It doesn’t necessarily have to be Grandpa Yang, or Yang the Sixth, or Yang the Seventh. Who says it can’t be Yang Zongbao[24] or Yang Wenguang?”[25] another voice argued.

“Why can’t it be Yang the Fourth?” yet another voice joined the debate.

“Yang the Fourth surrendered to the foreign invader. No one’s going to build a shrine for him,” the previous one explained.

“Are you implying that I will surrender to the foreign invader because I am the fourth?” the other one mocked.

“Sure, you are the fourth. But what has that gotten anything to do with Yang the fourth?” the previous one argued.

“You are the fifth. Yang the Fifth ended up becoming a monk on Mount Wutai. Why aren’t you a monk then?” the other one challenged.

“If I become a monk, you’ll have to surrender to the foreign invader,” the previous one responded.

Only after hearing the first sentence, Yue Buqun and Madam Yue had already figured out who they were – the bunch of Peach Valley’s Freaks. Yue Buqun waved a signal; the four of them quickly hid behind the statue, the Yue couple on the left and Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi on the right.

The bunch of Peach Valley’s Freaks kept arguing outside of the shrine, yet neither of them would simply come in to get the answer. Yue Lingshan couldn’t help but feel amused.

“What’s there to argue about? Whether it was Yang Zai-Xing or Yang the Fourth, why not just come in here and take a look? Wouldn’t that save a lot of trouble?” she thought to herself amusingly.

Madam Yue listened carefully and could only recognize five different voices. She figured that the sixth one must have died from her sword stab. The reason why she had left Mount Huashan with her husband was to stay away from those five freaks, afraid that they might go back for revenge. Who would have expected that they would meet right here? Even though the freaks hadn’t spotted their group of four yet, the other apprentices could show up any minute, and they would have no way of escaping at all. Worries clouded her mind.

The debate among the five freaks became more and more heated, and finally one of them suggested, “Why don’t we go inside and take a look. Then we’ll see which stinking guy this shrine was built for.”

The five of them all rushed in alongside, and one of them shouted excitedly.

“Aha, look here! It clearly says here ‘Shrine of General Yang Sir Zai-Xing’s Spirit.’ This of course is Yang Zai-Xing.” It was Branch Fairy.

Trunk Fairy scratched his head for a brief moment and then spoke, “It says ‘Yang Sir Zai’ here, not ‘Yang Zai-Xing.’ I see. This General Yang’s first name is Sir Zai. Hmm, Yang Sir Zai, Yang Sir Zai, what a great name!”

“This obviously is Yang Zai-Xing. You are so full of it. Why are you saying that it’s Yang Sir Zai?” Branch Fairy was infuriated.

“Read the words! It clearly says ‘Yang Sir Zai’, not ‘Yang Zai-Xing’.” Trunk Fairy argued.

“Then what do the words ‘Xing’s Spirit’ stand for?” Root Fairy joined in.

“Xing means happy.[26] Xing’s Spirit means the spirit is very happy. After this chap Yang Sir Zai died, people even built a shrine for him, of course his spirit is going to feel very happy,” Leaf Fairy explained.

“Exactly! Exactly!” Trunk Fairy couldn’t agree more.

“Didn’t I say that the shrine was built for Yang the Seventh? I am right once again! Man, I am so smart!” Flower Fairy said contentedly.

“It is Yang Zai-Xing. How can it be Yang the Seventh?” Branch Fairy asked angrily.

“It is Yang Sir Zai. How can it be Yang the Seventh?” Trunk Fairy also asked angrily.

“Third brother, what’s Yang Zai-Xing’s ranking among his brothers?” Flower Fairy asked.

“I don’t know.” Branch Fairy shook his head.

“Yang Zai-Xing was the seventh child. He was Yang the Seventh,” Flower Fairy claimed. “Second brother, what’s Yang Sir Zai’s ranking among his brothers?”

“I used to know. But I don’t remember now,” Trunk Fairy murmured.

“Well, I do remember. He was the seventh child also. That’s why he was Yang

the Seventh as well," Flower Fairy said with a big grin.

"If this statue is Yang Zai-Xing, then it can't be Yang Sir Zai. If it's Yang Sir Zai, then it can't be Yang Zai-Xing. How can it be both Yang Zai-Xing and Yang Sir Zai?" Root Fairy remarked.

"Big brother, think. What's the meaning of the word 'Zai?' 'Zai' means again, another one. This must be a statue for two, not just one. That's why it's both Yang Sir Zai and Yang Zai-Xing," Leaf Fairy explained.

"That sounds logical!" The other four Fairies all agreed.

"You say that if there's the word 'Zai' in one's name, that means one more, then it's obviously public knowledge that Yang the Seventh had seven sons!" Branch Fairy suddenly remarked.

"Following that logic, then if someone's name contained the word 'Thousand,' he will have to raise one thousand sons?" Root Fairy asked.

Hearing that the debate took such odd turns, Yue Lingshan almost broke into loud laughter. But she bit her lips hard and kept her silence.

The five Peach Valley's freaks argued some more when Branch Fairy suddenly blurted out, "Yang the Seventh! If you give blessings to our sixth brother and let him live, I am willing to kowtow to you. Actually, I am going to kowtow right now." He knelt down on the floor and kowtowed sincerely.

Hearing those words, Yue Buqun and Madam Yue exchanged a glance, each feeling somewhat relieved. Apparently that freak was still alive even though he took a severe stab from Madam Yue. Those Peach Valley's Six Fairies' behaviors were so hard to make sense of; the Yue couple would rather not make an enemy out of them.

"But what if sixth brother dies?" Branch Fairy asked.

"Then I'll smash this statue to bits and pieces and piss on whatever is left of him," Trunk Fairy answered.

"Even if you smash the statue of Yang the Seventh into bits and pieces, and then piss on it or even shit on it, so what? Sixth brother would be dead already,

and your kowtow would all be wasted!" Flower Fairy reminded him.

"You are right! I better hold the kowtow for now. Let's go get a clear answer, whether sixth brother's wound is curable or not. If it's curable, we can come back to kowtow; if it's not, then we'll come here to piss on him," Branch Fairy agreed.

"If it's curable, he will be cured whether we kowtow or not. There's no need to kowtow. If it's not, he won't be cured whether we piss or not. We can skip pissing," Root Fairy remarked.

"If sixth brother's wound is incurable, then we just skip pissing? Aren't our bladder gonna explode if we skip pissing? We could die!" Leaf Fairy asked.

Trunk Fairy suddenly broke into a loud cry. "If sixth brother won't survive this, we'll all stop taking a piss, even if we'll all die because of that."

At those words, the rest four fairies also broke into loud cries.

"Wait a minute," Branch Fairy suddenly stopped crying and instead, burst into loud laughter. "If sixth brother can be cured, wouldn't we be just crying for nothing? Come on guys, let's get a clear answer first, and then we can cry later."

"What you just said doesn't make sense at all. If sixth brother can be cured, then why would we be crying later?" Flower Fairy disagreed.

Amid the non-stop arguing, the five men rushed out of the shrine in quick steps.

"Whether that man will survive or not is of great importance to us," Yue Buqun said to Madam Yue. "Let me go look into this. Junior apprentice sister, you, Lingshan, and the other apprentices can stay here and wait for me."

"You can't just go all by yourself. Let me go with you and watch your back," Madam Yue replied in a determined tone and then ran out of the shrine first.

In the past, when Yue Buqun had important matters to deal with, Madam Yue would always go with him to aid. Hearing what his wife had said, Yue Buqun knew that it would be impossible to change her mind, so he simply followed quietly.

After the two of them went out of the shrine, from a distance, they could see the Peach Valley's Five Freaks turn into a col from a small path. Following the five men quietly, they dared not stay too close and kept a good distance. Thanked to the loud and non-stop arguing from the five, it wasn't hard for them to shadow the freaks from a long distance behind.

Following the mountain path, after passing by a dozen or so big willow trees, they came to a small creek. Several tile-roofed houses stood next by the creek. The arguing sound from the five freaks went straight into one of the houses.

"Let's circle around to the backside of the house," Yue Buqun suggested.

The couple ran toward their right using their Qing-Gong skills and circled back after about a quarter of a mile. A row of willow trees stood at the backside of the house. The two hid themselves behind the willow trees and listened.

Suddenly, the yelling voice of the Peach Valley's five freaks broke out abruptly.

"You just killed our sixth brother!"

"Why…why did you cut his chest open?"

"I am gonna kill you son of a bitch!"

"We'll cut your chest open too!"

"Oh, no! Sixth brother! You have died a horrible death! We…we'll never take a piss again, even if our bladders explode."

Yue Buqun and Madam Yue were astonished. "Did someone just cut their sixth brother's chest open?"

After exchanging some gestures, the two of them crept next to the window and looked inside from a crack of the window.

About seven or eight lights lit the entire room and a large bed occupied the middle of the room. A naked man lay on the bed facing up, his chest cut wide open and blood gushing everywhere. The man's eyes shut tightly as if he had been dead for sometime. His face showed clearly that he was none other than

the Fruit Fairy who took a stab from Madam Yue on top of Mount Huashan. The remaining five Peach Valley Freaks stood around the bed, shouting and yelling hysterically at a short, stocky man.

The short, stocky man had a larger-than-average head. The sparse mustache on his lips and the way he moved his head back and forth added much comical effect to his appearance. Both of his hands were covered with blood, the short dagger in his right hand also had blood dripping down from the tip of the blade. He stared at the five Peach Valley Freaks for a while and finally spoke.

"Are you done farting?"

"We are done. It's your turn now," the five freaks answered in unison.

"This half-dead man took a stab in the chest," the short, stocky guy replied. "You treated the wound with ointment and then carried him such a long way here so that I can save his life. But you were too slow. The wound had grown back together and all the nerves and internal passages had grown back the wrong way. Just to save his life is easy. But since his nerves and internal messages are all messed up, he will not only lose all his Kung Fu, but also become paralyzed from waist down. Why would I want to create such a good-for-nothing?"

"A good-for-nothing is still better than a dead man," Root Fairy challenged.

"Humph, either I cure him completely or I don't touch him at all. How utterly embarrassing it will be if I only make him into a good-for-nothing? Enough, enough! Now take this corpse and get out of here. I don't want to work on him no more! You guys are annoying me to death!" the short, stocky man snapped.

"You said we 'annoy you to death,' why aren't you dead yet?" Root Fairy asked.

"You have already annoyed me to death. Can't you tell? How do you know that I am not dead already?" the short, stocky man stared right into Root Fairy's eyes and answered in a chilly tone.

"If you are incapable of curing my sixth brother, why did you cut open his

chest?" Trunk Fairy asked.

"What does my nickname say?" the short, stocky man asked coldly.

"Isn't your stinking nickname something like 'Killer Doctor'?" Trunk Fairy answered.

A chill went through the Yue Couple's bodies as they cast a glimpse at each other, both thinking the same thing, "Who would have thought that this odd looking short fatty turned out to be the world-renowned 'Killer Doctor?' That's right, it is said throughout the Martial World that this Ping One-Finger possesses the most excellent skills in healing and curing. It would only be natural that the five freaks took their seriously wounded brother to him for a cure."

Ping One-Finger's cold voice rose again. "Since my nickname is 'Killer Doctor,' what's such a big deal when I kill one or two?"

"What's so hard about killing somebody? Even I know how to do that. But you only know how to kill people, not how to cure people. You are not worth the part of the name where it says 'doctor'," Flower Fairy joined in.

"Who says I don't know how to cure people? I cut open this half-dead man's chest so that I can reconnect his nerves and internal passages. After I am finished with him, both his internal and external Kung Fu skills will remain the same as if he was never wounded. Only that will show the true skills of the 'Killer Doctor'," Ping One-Finger replied.

The five Peach Valley Freaks were overjoyed at these words. "So you are capable of curing our sixth brother. We shouldn't have blamed you," they responded in unison.

"Why…why aren't you working on him? Sixth brother's chest has been cut open. He is bleeding terribly. If you don't hurry up, it will be too late," Root Fairy reminded him.

"Now are you the 'Killer Doctor' or am I the 'Killer Doctor'?" Ping One-Finger asked.

"Of course you are. What a dumb question that is!" Root Fairy answered.

“Very well! If I am, then how would you know whether it’s too late or not?” Ping One-Finger retorted. “Besides, I was already working on him after I cut his chest open. But how can I get on with my work when five wordy creeps simply wouldn’t shut up and leave me alone? Didn’t I tell you to go have fun at the ‘Shrine of General Yang’ for a half-day and then also check out the ‘Shrine of General Niu’ and the ‘Shrine of General Zhang?’ Why have you come back so soon?”

“Hey, get on with your work. You are the wordy one now, not us,” Trunk Fairy responded.

Ping One-Finger gave him a good stare for a moment, and then out of nowhere, he suddenly shouted out, “Get me the needle and the thread!”

The unexpected shout took the five Peach Valley’s Fairies and the Yue couple by surprise; everyone’s heart almost skipped a beat. A tall and thin woman walked in the room with a wooden basin in her hands. Quietly, she set the basin on the table. The woman was in her forties and had a square face with two big ears and a pair of sunken eyes. Her face looked pale and had little color in the cheeks.

“You want me to save this man here. I have already told you my rules, haven’t I?” Ping One-Finger spoke again.

“Sure. And we have agreed to it and swore our oath already. No matter whom you want dead, just let us know. We promise that we won’t disappoint you,” Root Fairy answered.

“Good,” Ping One-Finger nodded. “I haven’t thought of anyone that I want dead. I’ll let you know once I decide. Now, all of you stand over there and shut your mouth up. If I hear anything from you, I swear that I’ll give it up and not give a damn about this man no more.”

Ever since they were kids, the six Peach Valley brothers had always slept in the same room and eaten on the same table. They never stopped talking. Even in their dreams they kept on arguing back and forth. But now all they could do was to stare at each other, each had a stomach full of things he would love to spill

out. When they thought that even a single word out of their mouth would get their sixth brother killed, each one of them bit his lips hard to fight the urge to talk, afraid of letting any sound out, not even a heavy breath or a fart.

Ping One-Finger picked up a big needle from the tray on the table. After threading in the thick, diaphanous thread, he quickly sewed Fruit Fairy's chest back together. His ten fingers were short and chunky, almost like ten carrots, yet they moved with ultimate efficiency and accuracy. Within moments, he had already sewed the over nine-inch long wound back together. Then he took many kinds of medicine, some powder, some liquid, from the many china bottles behind him and applied them to the wound. Next, he pried Fruit Fairy's mouth open and poured some different kinds of liquid down the throat before wiping the blood off Fruit Fairy's body with a wet cloth. The tall and thin woman helped by the side, sometimes handing over the medicines, sometimes holding the needle for him, appearing to be very proficient.

Ping One-Finger glimpsed at the five Peach Valley's Fairies. Seeing that all five of them had already opened their mouths and were in a rush to begin talking, he said, "This man hasn't come back to life yet. You can begin talking after he comes back to life." With their mouths still open, the five freaks' faces froze instantly with a totally awkward look. Ping One-Finger let out a snort and then sat down by the side. The woman took the needle, thread, dagger and the rest of the stuff out of the room.

Hiding outside of the window, Yue Buqun and Madam Yue held their breaths. At the moment it was completely silent inside the room, so any little sound from outside of the window would, for sure, catch the attention of the people inside the room.

After a long while, Ping One-Finger stood up and walked by Fruit Fairy. All of a sudden, he struck out with his palm and smacked heavily on the Bai-Hui Acupoint on Fruit Fairy's head. "Ah!" six men shouted out in shock. Out of the six men, five were the Peach Valley's Five Fairies, and the sixth one was actually the man lying on bed who had been unconscious all the time – Fruit Fairy.

Right after the cry, Fruit Fairy sat straight up and scolded, "God damn it! What

the hell did you hit my head for?"

"God damn it! If I didn't drill open your Bai-Hui Acupoint with my inner energy, would you have recovered so quickly?" Ping One-Finger scolded back.

"God damn it! Quick or slow, my recovery is none of your business!" Fruit Fairy rebuffed.

"God damn it! If your recovery were slow, how would people know the brilliance of the Killer Doctor's skills? And wouldn't it be annoying to have you sleep in my room any longer than necessary?" Ping One-Finger replied.

"God damn it! Are you saying that I am annoying you? I am getting out of here. You think I care about you?" Fruit Fairy mocked. As soon as he said those words, he rolled out of bed and headed out.

The other five Peach Valley Freaks had not expected him to recover so quickly and were able to walk out just like he said he would. In great shock and joy, they all followed him out of the door.

Completely shocked and terrified, the Yue couple all came to the same conclusion, "That Ping One-Finger's medical skills are indeed astonishing. Besides, his inner strength is nothing ordinary, either. When he smacked the Bai-Hui Acupoint on Fruit Fairy's head, he must have injected vigorous inner energy into Fruit Fairy's body to wake him up instantly." Within the moment of hesitation, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies had gone far away.

Ping One-Finger stood up and then walked into another room. Yue Buqun gave his wife a signal, and the two quietly sneaked away. Not until they were hundreds of feet away from the room did they speed up their steps.

"That Killer Doctor's inner strength is simply extraordinary. But his behavior was indeed very unusual," Madam Yue exclaimed.

"Since the Peach Valley's Six Freaks are around, the city of Kaifeng has gotten to be a place of trouble. We'd better leave here at once. There's no need for us to get tangled up with them," Yue Buqun suggested.

Madam Yue answered with a hum. Throughout her life, only the last several

months had given her the most grievances. Even her husband, the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, a member school of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, had to run around in hiding. And it almost felt as if there was nowhere safe no matter where they went. The couple had never kept anything from each other, but every time when this topic came up, both of them would immediately change topic to avoid the embarrassment. Now when they finally knew that Fruit Fairy would live on, both felt great relief as if a big rock had been removed from their hearts.

The two of them went straight back to the "Shrine of General Yang" and found Yue Lingshan, Lin Pingzhi, Lao Denuo, and the rest of the apprentices waiting at the back hall.

"Let's get back to the boat," Yue Buqun ordered.

By then everybody had become aware that the Peach Valley's Five Freaks were close by, so neither questioned the order and all returned to the boat in a hurry. Just when they were going to ask the boatman to set sail, the Peach Valley's Five Fairies' loud shouts suddenly came from ashore.

"Linghu Chong! Linghu Chong! Where are you?"

All faces of the Huashan Sword School members changed color as they watched six men rushing toward the wharf in trots. Besides the Peach Valley's Five Fairies, there was also Ping One-Finger among the group. The Peach Valley's Five Fairies had seen the Yue Buqun couple before, so when they recognized Yue couple's faces from afar, all cheered uncontrollably. Within seconds, they had arrived and immediately all five of them leapt toward the boat.

Instantly Madam Yue unsheathed her sword and stabbed it forward toward Root Fairy's chest. At the exact same time, Yue Buqun also drew his sword and pushed Madam Yue's blade down using that of his own.

"Don't be reckless!" he whispered.

The bow of the boat sunk slightly when the Peach Valley's Five Fairies boarded the boat.

“Linghu Chong! Where are you hiding? Why don’t you come out?” Root Fairy yelled loudly.

“Why should I hide? Am I afraid of you?” Linghu Chong roared in fury.

Right at the moment, the boat bumped slightly and another person had leapt aboard – the “Killer Doctor” Ping One-Finger.

Yue Buqun felt a great shock inward. “The minute junior apprentice sister and I got back this dwarf shows up right here. Could we have left any traces when we sneaked about outside of his window? Could he have found the traces? The Peach Valley’s Five Freaks alone are already hard enough to deal with, not mentioning adding such a tough opponent on top of that. Alas, perhaps our lives are destined to end here at Kaifeng today.” Then he heard Ping One-Finger speak.

“May I ask which one of you is brother Linghu?”

Surprisingly, his words were quite polite.

“I am Linghu Chong. May I have your respectful name? May I ask what I can do for you?” Linghu Chong slowly walked onto the bow of the boat and answered.

Ping One-Finger looked Linghu Chong up and down. “Someone has asked me to treat your wounds,” he said.

Reaching out and grabbing Linghu Chong by his hand, he placed his index finger on top of Linghu Chong’s wrist and began checking his pulses. Suddenly, he raised his eyebrows and uttered a cry of surprise. But soon his eyebrows gradually knitted into a straight line and another cry of surprise followed. Raising his head high, he stared into the sky blankly, his left hand scratching his head madly.

“How odd! How odd!” he murmured to himself.

A long while passed before he reached out again to check Linghu Chong’s pulse from the other wrist. But as soon as his index finger touched Linghu Chong’s wrist, he sneezed all of a sudden.

“This is so weird. I’ve never seen anything like this before,” he muttered.

Root Fairy could no longer hold his tongue and jumped in. “What’s so odd about it? It’s so obvious that he was wounded in his Heart Passage. I have already treated him with my inner energy.”

“Why are you still insisting on saying that he was wounded in his Heart Passage? Obviously he had problems with his Lung Passage. If it weren’t I who opened his many acupoints along the Lung Passage, you think he’d still be alive today?” Trunk Fairy immediately rebuffed.

Wasting no time, Branch Fairy, Leaf Fairy and Flower Fairy all jumped into the big debate, each claiming himself the only one that gave the right and critical treatment and the one who should get the credits.

Ping One-Finger suddenly gave a loud shout, “What crap!”

“Hey! Are you talking crap, or are we, the five brothers, talking crap?” Root Fairy mocked angrily.

“Of course you are!” Ping One-Finger answered. “Inside brother Linghu’s body, there are two streams of stronger energy flow, which seemed to have come from Monk No Commandment. There are also six streams of weaker energy flow, which probably came from you guys, you six fools!”

Yue Buqun and Madam Yue shot a glance at each other, both thinking, “This Ping One-Finger is indeed incredible. It’s not hard to detect the eight streams of energy flow inside Chong from his pulse, but it is completely amazing that he is able to identify the origin of the different energy streams and knew two of them came from Monk No Commandment.”

“Why are you saying that our six energy streams are weaker and the god-damned No Commandment’s energy streams are stronger? There’s no doubt that ours are stronger and his are weaker!” Trunk Fairy snubbed furiously.

“What a nerve!” Ping One-Finger sneered. “He was only one, yet his two energy streams overwhelmed all the energy streams of the six of you combined. How the hell could yours be stronger, huh? Monk No Commandment the old

scumbag, he has outstanding Kung Fu skills yet no brain! God damn it! What an idiot!"

Flower Fairy stuck his finger out and pretended to also check Linghu Chong's pulse. "Well," he said, "it seems that the energy streams of the Peach Valley's Six Fairies are actually in total control and have completely overwhelmed Monk No Commandment's…." Suddenly he cried out in pain and pulled his finger back quickly as if somebody has bitten it. "Ouch! God damn it!" he shouted.

Looking very pleased, Ping One-Finger burst into loud laughter. Everybody could tell that he must have passed his advanced inner energy through Linghu Chong's body and gave Flower Fairy a painful shock.

After some more laughing, Ping One-Finger put the solemn face back on.

"Listen up, all of you! Go wait in the boat's hold and be quiet! I don't want hear a word out of you!"

"Wait a minute! What makes you think we'd do exactly what you tell us to do?" Leaf Fairy protested.

"Didn't you swear an oath that you would kill a person for me?" Ping One-Finger asked.

"That's right! But we only agreed to kill a person for you. We never agreed to follow your orders?" Branch Fairy answered.

"It's totally up to you whether you want to follow my orders or not. But what if I ask you to kill the Fruit Fairy of the Peach Valley's Six Fairies? What do you think?" Ping One-Finger sneered.

The Five Fairies all shouted out in protests. "That's outrageous! You have just cured him. Why are you asking us to kill him?"

"Well, what kind of oath did you five swear to me?" Ping One-Finger asked.

"We agreed that if you can cure our brother Fruit Fairy, then when you order us to kill a person, regardless of who that person is, we must do it. No excuses, whatsoever," Root Fairy replied.

“That’s correct!” Ping One-Finger nodded. “Now did I cure your brother?”

“Yes, you did!” Flower Fairy concurred.

“Is Fruit Fairy a person?” Ping One-Finger pressed on.

“Of course he is a person. He is no ghost,” Leaf Fairy answered.

“Fine. I want you to kill a person for me, and this person is Fruit Fairy!” Ping One-Finger concluded.

The five Fairies looked at each other in blank dismay. All felt that this order was unspeakably queer, yet neither of them could think of any argument.

“If you are not willing to kill Fruit Fairy, I am sure we can work something out. Now will you follow my orders? I am telling you to go sit in the boat’s hold and behave yourselves. I don’t want any movement or any word out of you,” Ping One-Finger commanded.

The five Fairies hurriedly acknowledged the order, and within seconds, all five of them sat down in the hold, their hands on their knees and their backs straight up, making sure that no one could have behaved any better than them.

“Master Ping, I heard that you have this rule when you treat your patients: after you’ve cured the patient, he will have to kill someone for you. Is that true?” Linghu Chong asked.

“That’s correct! I do have this rule,” Ping One-Finger admitted.

“But I don’t want to kill anyone for you, so please save your trouble and don’t treat me,” Linghu Chong exclaimed.

“Huh!” Ping One-Finger uttered a cry of surprise. He looked Linghu Chong up and down as if he had seen something totally eccentric and abnormal. After a long pause, he spoke again.

“Firstly, your case is too severe and I can’t cure you; secondly, even if I could cure you, someone else has already agreed to kill for me. You don’t have to worry about it at all.”

Ever since Yue Lingshan had shifted her love interests to someone else,

Linghu Chong had lost the joy of life. But when he heard from this famous doctor, who had such a great reputation with his capability of bringing the dying back to life, that even he couldn't cure the wounds, Linghu Chong still found himself swept by utter desolation.

The Yue couple gave each other a stare, both thinking, "Who has gotten such great due respect that could have made 'Killer Doctor' to make house calls? What kind of relationship does he have with Chong?"

"Brother Linghu," Ping One-Finger spoke again. "There are eight streams of foreign energy forces inside your body that could not be discharged, nor dissolved, nor tamed, nor overpowered, which have caused all the injuries and suffering. I was entrusted the task to cure your wounds. It's not that I am holding any effort back from you. Because your injuries are related to inner energy, that's why medicine and medical treatments won't do you any good. Ever since I became a doctor, I've never seen any injuries like this. Alas, there's really nothing I can do. I am so ashamed."

He took a china bottle out from his chest pocket and then poured ten vermilion pills into his palm.

"These are ten 'Heart-Soothing' pills. They contain many kinds of precious medicinal materials and took me a long time to make. Take one pill every ten days and you will be able to live for another one hundred days."

"Many thanks!" Linghu Chong took the pills respectfully.

Ping One-Finger turned around and headed toward the bank. But suddenly he turned back again. "There are two more pills in the bottle. I might as well give all of them to you." He took out the china bottle and handed it out.

But Linghu Chong didn't take it. "I can tell that senior master really treasure these pills very much. They must contain great healing power. It's probably better to keep them with you to save someone else in the future. Even if I could live ten days or twenty days longer, it's not gonna do anybody, even I myself, any good."

Ping One-Finger threw a sideways glance at Linghu Chong for a moment and

then murmured, “Having no regards of one’s own life, you do show the qualities of a true man. No wonder! No wonder! Alas, what a pity! I am sorry!”

He shook his giant head, turned around, leapt off the boat, and then walked off in big strides. He came and went so abruptly and completely ignored Yue Buqun, the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School. Yue Buqun was greatly annoyed. But there were still five menaces sitting in the boat’s hold. Getting rid of them was not going to be an easy task.

The five Fairies all sat absolutely still, their eyes looking down, their hands on their knees, as if they were monks meditating in trance. If Yue Buqun ordered the boat to start sail, then the five menaces would have, for sure, been brought along. If he didn’t order the boat to start sail, then nobody knew how long they were going to just sit there, or if they were going to jump up suddenly to attack in retaliation for the stab Madam Yue gave Fruit Fairy. Lao Denuo, Yue Lingshan, and some more apprentices had seen with their own eyes the horrible scene how the Fairies had ripped Cheng Buyou into pieces. Even now, each of them could still feel chills on their back from the fear. They simply gazed at each other in dismay, and neither was even brave enough to cast a glance at those five.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” Linghu Chong came back into the hold.

“We are just sitting here and behaving ourselves. We are not doing anything,” Root Fairy answered.

“We are about to start sail. You can go back ashore now,” Linghu Chong urged.

“Ping One-Finger told us to sit in the hold and behave ourselves, no talks and no movements. Otherwise, he is gonna ask us to kill our brother. That’s why we are sitting here behaving ourselves and dare not talk or move,” Branch Fairy replied.

Linghu Chong couldn’t help but grin at these words. “Doctor Ping has gone ashore already. You can start talking and moving now!”

“No way! No way! What if he sees us talking and moving about? That’s not

going to be good!" Flower Fairy shook his head frantically.

Suddenly a croaky voice floated from ashore, "Hey, you five ugly goblins! Where are you?"

"I think he's calling us," Root Fairy suggested.

"Why do you think he's calling us? Are we ugly goblins?" Branch Fairy argued.

The voice shouted again, "I have one more ugly goblin here. Doctor Ping has just cured him. Do you want him or not? If you don't want him, I am gonna drop him in the river to feed the fish."

Hearing those, the five Fairies instantly leapt out of the hold side by side and landed ashore. The middle-aged woman who had helped Ping One-Finger with the operation stood by the river straight as a ramrod. With her left arm extended to the side, she lifted a stretcher in her left hand, and Fruit Fairy lay on the stretcher. The woman looked ill from her face yet had great strength. To lift the over one hundred pounds Fruit Fairy plus the wooden stretcher using only one arm seemed so easy for her.

"Of course we want him. Why would we not want him?" Root Fairy said hurriedly.

"Why are you calling us ugly goblins?" Branch Fairy asked.

"Look at yourself, you look more like an ugly goblin yourself," Fruit Fairy said while lying on the stretcher.

It turned out that after Ping One-Finger had sewed Fruit Fairy's wound back together, fed him some miraculous medicine, and then smacked his head to inject advanced inner energy, he immediately stood up and walked out. But due to the loss of great amount of blood, he fainted again after only a short distance and was brought back into the room by the middle-aged woman. Even though he was still far from recovering, his wounds didn't keep him from yielding to anyone orally, and he simply couldn't help but contradict the woman.

"Do you know what Doctor Ping fears the most in his life?" the woman asked

coldly.

"We don't know. What does he fear the most?" the six Fairies replied in unison.

"He fears his wife!" the woman answered.

"We thought he feared nothing at all. Who would have though he actually fears his wife? Ha-ha! Oh my god! Ha-ha!" The Peach Valley's Six Fairies laughed so hard that they almost laughed their heads off.

"What's so funny? I am his wife," the woman said in a chilling tone.

Instantly, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies shut themselves up.

"He never dare disobey my orders," the woman continued. "If I want anyone dead, that person will be the one he tells you to kill."

"Yes! Yes! May we ask you who you want dead, Mrs. Ping?" the Peach Valley's Six Fairies asked in unison.

The woman cast a glance toward the boat's hold and looked at all the Huashan members one by one. Her eyes moved from Yue Buqun to Madam Yue, then to Yue Lingshan, then to the rest of the Huashan apprentices. Every one could feel goose bumps all over his back, all knowing that if this woman with the ugly and bloodless face had pointed at one of them, the five Fairies would instantly rip that person into pieces. Even first class fighters like Yue Buqun perhaps wouldn't be able to escape from their hands.

The woman slowly looked away from the Huashan members and then turned her eyes to the faces of the six Fairies. The six brothers also felt their heart pounding in their chests from fear. "Uh," the woman let out a sound, and the six Fairies immediately answered, "Yes! Yes!" "Hum," the woman let out a snort, and the six Fairies again answered at once, "Yes! Yes!"

"I haven't thought of whom I want dead," the woman finally said. "But Doctor Ping said that there's a Young Master Linghu Chong on the boat who he respects very much. You must wait upon him until he dies. Whatever he tells you to do, you will do it for him with no exceptions. Do you hear me?"

“Wait upon him until he dies?” the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies asked with big frowns.

“That’s correct! Wait upon him until he dies. But he only has one hundred days left in this life. Within the next one hundred days, you must obey all of his orders,” Mrs. Ping explained.

Hearing that Linghu Chong only had no more than one hundred days left, the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies all became happy again. “Sure, to wait upon him for one hundred days shouldn’t be that hard!” they all said.

“I am truly grateful for Master Ping’s generous offer, but I dare not trouble the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies to care for me,” Linghu Chong rejected. “Will you please tell them to stay ashore? We hereby bid our farewell to you.”

Mrs. Ping kept her cold face without any sign of joy or anger, whatsoever. “Doctor Ping said that Young Master Linghu’s internal injury is solely caused by those six scumbags. Not only would Young Master Linghu die because of that, it also made Doctor Ping lose great face from not being able to cure him and give a satisfactory answer to the one who entrusted him for the task, that’s why he must punish these six scumbags to a great extent. Doctor Ping had planned to ask them to kill one of their brothers following their own oath, but he decided to show mercy and only ask them to wait upon Young Master Linghu.”

She paused for a moment and then continued. “If these six scumbags do not follow Young Master Linghu’s commands and Doctor Ping hears about it, he promises to kill one of them immediately.”

“Since brother Linghu’s injury was caused by us, it’s really nothing that we wait upon him for a while. A true man knows when to pay back a favor and when to settle a score,” Flower Fairy declared.

“A true man is willing to sacrifice himself for the sake of friendship, much less waiting upon his injuries,” Branch Fairy added.

“My wounds also need someone to wait upon. So I’ll wait upon him and he will wait upon me. Back and forth, it’s good for both of us,” Fruit Fairy followed.

“Not mentioning that we can only wait upon him for a limited one hundred days. How short it is!” Trunk Fairy joined in.

Root Fairy smacked his own thigh loudly and said, “Even in the old days people could travel a thousand miles to help at the news of their friend’s trouble. For us six brothers, did we ever hesitate to jump in troubles and help the needed…?”

Mrs. Ping shot a glance of distain toward the six Fairies and then simply walked away. Branch Fairy and Trunk Fairy lifted the stretcher and leapt onboard. Root Fairy and the rest of the Fairies all followed. Then six voices shouted simultaneously, “Start the sail! Start the sail!”

By then, Linghu Chong knew that, for sure, they wouldn’t be able to keep the six Fairies from going together with them, so he said, “Six Fairy brothers! I can let you come together with us, but you must show good manners to my Master and Master-Wife. This is my first order. If you don’t do as I say, then I don’t want you to wait upon me.”

“We, the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies, have always been refined and courteous gentlemen. Everybody knows that. We will even show respects to your apprentice or your grand-apprentice, much less your Master and Master-Wife,” Leaf Fairy replied.

Hearing that he had called himself a refined and courteous gentleman, Linghu Chong found himself greatly amused. He turned to Yue Buqun and said, “Master, these six Fairy brothers would like to board our boat and sail east with us. Do you think it’s alright?”

Yue Buqun pondered. It seemed that, at least for now, these six wouldn’t make things difficult for the Huashan School. With everybody else on the same boat, they still remained a serious hidden danger. But it was probably impossible to drive them away under the current circumstance. Fortunately these six men appeared to be mentally deranged despite the outstanding Kung Fu skills they possessed. So it wouldn’t be entirely impossible to contain them by strategy. At that thought, he nodded.

“Alright. I guess they can take the boat with us if they insist. But I prefer a quiet life and would not want to listen to them argue back and forth non-stop.”

“You’ve said it wrong, Mr. Yue,” Branch Fairy argued. “Why do you think a person is born with a mouth? Other than eating, this mouth is also used to talk. And how about the two ears? Of course they are used to listen to people talking. If you prefer a quiet life, then you are really letting the Almighty Creator down for giving you a mouth and two ears.”

Yue Buqun knew too well that if he had argued back, when the other five brothers’ five mouths all joined in, that would be like opening a can of worms, and there would be no end to it. He couldn’t beat them in physical fight, nor would he be able to beat them in a word fight, so he simply let out a slight smile and then said, “Boatman, set sail!”

“Mr. Yue, didn’t you just open your mouth to tell the boatman to set sail? If you really prefer a quiet life, you should have signaled him to set sail with a gesture,” Leaf Fairy joined in.

“The boatman is at the back of the boat, and Mr. Yue is here in the middle section. If he had signaled yet the boatman couldn’t see him, then it would still be useless,” Trunk Fairy disagreed.

“Couldn’t he have walked to the back of the boat and then signal the gesture?” Root Fairy suggested.

“What if the boatman couldn’t understand his gesture and thought the ‘set sail’ command was the ‘sink the boat’ command? That would be terrible,” Flower Fairy argued.

Amid the arguments from the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies, the boatman had weighed the anchor and set sail.

Both Yue Buqun and Madam Yue cast a glance at Linghu Chong spontaneously followed by a brief glance at the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies. After exchanging some looks at each other, the Yue couple all had the same thought.

“Ping One-Finger mentioned that someone had entrusted him to treat Chong’s

injury. From his words, it seems that this person must have been someone with very high status in the Martial World, that was why Ping thought nothing of the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, yet was very polite to an apprentice of the Huashan Sword School. Who had entrusted Doctor Ping to treat Chong? Since Ping called Monk No Commandment a 'god damned idiot,' then obviously it wasn't Monk No Commandment."

In the old days, they would have called Linghu Chong over and asked him in detail, but unconsciously, much misunderstanding had emerged between the master and the apprentice. Both of them knew it was not yet the time to ask Linghu Chong. When Madam Yue thought of that even Ping One-Finger, the number one doctor in the Martial World, couldn't cure Linghu Chong's injury and that he only had one hundred days left in his life, sadness welled up in her heart and tears streamed down her cheek.

Sailing with the wind and downstream, the boat traveled speedily. By evening, they were already not far from the town of Lanfeng. The boatman anchored the boat along the bank and soon had prepared dinner. Just when everyone was ready for supper, suddenly, loud voices came from ashore.

"Excuse me! May I ask if the heroes of the Huashan Sword School are on this boat?"

Before Yue Buqun had a chance to answer, Branch Fairy had already answered, "Heroes of both the Huashan Sword School and the Peach Valley's Six Fairies are all on this boat. What do you want?"

"Great! Great! We have been waiting here for an entire day and night. Hurry! Hurry up! Take those over!" the man replied gleefully.

Over a dozen hefty looking men walked out from a straw mat shed falling into two lines, each with a red-lacquered small case in his hands. An empty-handed man in a blue robe walked by the boat and bowed down.

"Our superior was very concerned when he heard that young hero Linghu was not feeling well. He really wanted to pay a visit himself but simply did not have enough time to make the trip back. So he sent me specific orders by homing

pigeons and asked me to present some small gifts to young hero Linghu on his behalf."

One by one, the dozen of men walked aboard in a file and placed the over a dozen of cases down on the boat.

Utterly surprised, Linghu Chong couldn't help but ask, "I am Linghu Chong. May I ask who the respectful superior of yours is? I am afraid I am unworthy of such generous gifts."

"Young hero Linghu is a man of good fortunes. I am sure you will fully recover in no time. Please take care!" the man replied. Bowing down respectfully, he led the bunch of men and walked away.

"I wonder who is sending me the gifts. This is so odd," Linghu Chong murmured.

The Peach Valley's Five Fairies could no longer hold their patience. "Let's open them up!" they acclaimed in unison and soon had opened all of the red-lacquered small cases. Some of the cases were filled with exquisite refreshments and pastry; some contained smoked chicken or ham that were great to go with wine; some held all kinds of expensive and precious medicinal materials such as ginseng, pilose antler, swallow nest, and tremella; the last two cases were filled with small gold and silver ingots, apparently for Linghu Chong to use along his trip. These were no small gifts at all! As soon as the Peach Valley's Five Fairies spotted the candies, cookies, candied fruits, and the pastries in the different cases, they wasted no time grabbing the treats and jamming them into their mouths. "This is delicious! So delicious!" they shouted cheerfully.

Linghu Chong checked the many cases carefully and thoroughly yet didn't find any notes, seals, or signs that would give out a trace of the gift-giver's identity.

"Master," Linghu Chong said to Yue Buqun, "I really can't figure this one out. These people seem to bear no ill will, and it doesn't look like that they are playing pranks on us either." Having said those words, he put some of the treats in front of his Master and Master-Wife respectfully before distributing the rest of

them to his apprentice brothers and sisters.

Yue Buqun cast a glance at the Peach Valley's Six Fairies. They all had some of the treats, and none of them had any abnormal reactions from the food. It seemed that the food was not poisoned. So he asked Linghu Chong.

"Do you have any martial friends living in this area?"

"No." Linghu Chong shook his head after he pondered for a moment.

Sound of hoof beats suddenly rose. Eight riders dashed toward them along the river. Someone shouted among the riders.

"Is young hero Linghu of the Huashan Sword School over there?"

"Yes, yes! He's over here! What good stuff have you brought with you?" the Peach Valley's Six Fairies shouted cheerfully.

"Our chief heard that young hero Linghu had come to the town of Lanfeng. He also heard that young hero Linghu is quite fond of wine, so he told me to put together sixteen jars of excellent mellow wine and bring them here, so young hero Linghu can enjoy them on the boat along his trip," the man shouted back.

Soon, the eight riders had arrived, and sure enough, each saddle atop the horsebacks had two wine jars hanging from it. And on the wine jars, some wrote "Best Quality Royal-Wine," some wrote "High Grade Fen-Wine,"[27] and some others wrote "Shaoxing Red Wine."[28] These sixteen jars of wine turned out to have contained sixteen different types of wine. In Linghu Chong's mind, there was nothing else that could have been a better gift than these great wines. He hurried to the bow of the boat and then cupped his hands to salute.

"Please forgive my ignorance. Will you please tell me the name of your respectful clan? And what is your respectful name?"

"Our chief specifically told us again and again to not mention the name of our clan to young hero Linghu. He said that these are only very humble gifts. It's embarrassing enough. Why embarrass ourselves even more by mentioning our names?" the man answered with a grin. He waved a signal to his companions, and all the riders carried the many wine jars onto the boat.

Yue Buqun gazed at the eight men from within the boat's hold. Every one of them was vigorous and nimble. Carrying one wine jar in each hand, they leapt aboard easily. None of the eight had any outstanding Kung Fu skills, and it was obvious that they were all from different Kung Fu schools. They must have been telling the truth when they said that they were members of a clan.

After sending the sixteen jars of wine aboard, the eight men bowed to Linghu Chong, jumped back onto their horses, and soon faded into the night.

"Master, how strange this is! I wonder who is playing a joke with me and sent me this many jars of wine," Linghu Chong grinned.

"Could it be Tian Boguang? Or could it be Monk No Commandment?" Yue Buqun murmured.

"Right!" Linghu Chong replied. "Those two tend to do things the odd way. Who knows, it might be them behind all these. Hey, Peach Valley's Six Fairies! We have so much great wine here. Aren't you going to have some?"

"Of course! Of course! We don't' see any reason not to!" the Peach Valley's Six Fairies agreed wholeheartedly.

Root Fairy and Trunk Fairy each picked up a jar. After opening the seal, they poured the wine into bowls. The wonderful smell immediately filled the air. The six Fairies didn't even pretend to be polite to Linghu Chong, raising the bowls up and down, they began swallowing the great wine in big gulps.

Linghu Chong also filled a bowl with wine and took it to Yue Buqun.

"Master, please have some. This wine is not bad, indeed."

Yue Buqun slightly frowned and hummed.

"Master," Lao Denuo joined in, "taking precaution never hurts. We don't know who sent us these wines. Who knows if there's anything odd in these wines?"

Yue Buqun nodded in agreement. "Chong, we'd better be careful."

But once the wonderful smell of high quality wine had gone into Linghu Chong's nose, he could no longer hold his craving.

“I won’t be living much longer, anyway. It’s no difference for me whether the wine was poisoned or not,” he said with a grin.

Raising the bowl up with both hands, Linghu Chong poured all the wine in the bowl into his mouth and swallowed them in big gulps. “Great wine! Fabulous!” he praised.

Suddenly a voice came from ashore. Someone also praised loudly, “Great wine! Fabulous!”

Linghu Chong looked toward the direction the voice had come from and his eyes came upon a down and out scholar looking man in shabby clothes. The scholar had a torn folding fan in his right hand. Raising his head high, he sniffed again and again in the air, trying hard to catch as much of the great scent of wine as possible.

“Definitely great wine!” the scholar praised again.

“You haven’t even tasted it, how would you know if the wine was good or bad, brother?” Linghu Chong asked with a grin.

“As soon as you smell the scent of the wine, you should have known that this is sixty-two year old High Grade Fen-Wine. Then undoubtedly it has to be great!” the scholar replied.

Linghu Chong had become quite an expert in the subject of wine thanked to the enthusiastic teachings from the Elder Bamboo-Green. He had already figured out that the wine was about sixty years old. But it would be simply impossible to be so sure that the wine was exactly sixty-two years old. The scholar must be exaggerating, he thought.

“If this brother doesn’t mind, would you like to join us for some wine?” Linghu Chong invited with a smile.

“But you hardly know me at all,” the scholar replied while wagging his head back and forth. “We have only met by chance like patches of drifting duckweed. I’ve already disturbed you enough by sniffing the scent of wine here. How can I trouble you even further by drinking your wine? I really couldn’t do that! I

certainly couldn't do that!"

"The old saying said it well: We are all brothers within the four seas. From what you just said, I can tell that you must be an expert in the knowledge of wine. I'd love to consult you on some of the questions. Come aboard please! Don't be too modest," Linghu Chong invited again with a smile.

Hearing these words, the scholar strolled over slowly. After bowing down deeply, he said, "My surname is Zu, the same Zu that's in the word ancestor.[29] The famous Zu Di[30] in history who trained at the first crow of a cock was indeed a remote ancestor of mine. My first name is Qianqiu, which means a thousand years. This brother! May I ask what your respectful name is?"

"My surname is Linghu, and my first name is Chong," Linghu Chong replied.

"Great surname! Great surname! And your first name is great too!" Zu Qianqiu praised while walking aboard the boat from the springboard.

Linghu Chong was amused. "Just because I am inviting him for some wine, even my name is now a better name. Go figure!" he couldn't help thinking.

He filled a bowl with wine and then handed the bowl to Zu Qianqiu.

"Here you go! Enjoy!" he said.

Zu Qianqiu was a man in his fifties. He had a sallow face, a pair of listless eyes, and a brandy nose. Sparse beard occupied the lower half of his face. The front of his garment had many oil stains. When he extended his hands out, filth could clearly be seen under the fingernails of all his ten fingers. He was a thin man yet had a big belly that was totally out of proportion.

Seeing that Linghu Chong had handed over the bowl of wine, Zu Qianqiu didn't take it from him right away.

"Brother Linghu, although you have great wines, yet you don't have any good vessels of wine. What a great pity that is!" he exclaimed.

"We are in the middle of a trip and only have a few rough bowls and cups. Mister Zu, you'll just have to make do with them," Linghu Chong replied.

"No way! No Way!" Zu Qianqiu shook his head and exclaimed. "Obviously you haven't mastered the secret of the art of drinking; otherwise, you wouldn't have been so careless about the vessels of wine. The art of drinking must have great regards to the vessels of wine. The kind of wine cup to use is very particular to what kind of wine you are drinking. If you are drinking Fen-Wine, then of course we have to use a Jade Cup. In the Tang Dynasty, a poet once wrote, '*Jade Cups bring about the light of amber.*'[31] Evidently a Jade Cup can help to perfect the color of the wine."

"No doubt!" Linghu Chong agreed.

"Look at this jar of the Northeastern White-Wine," Zu Qianqiu pointed at one of the wine jars and continued, "the flavor of the wine is excellent, but it lacks the sweet scent of good wine. You'd better drink it with a Rhino-horn Cup, which will make the wine taste just perfect. One should know that a Jade Cup will enhance the color of the wine and a Rhino-horn Cup will enhance the sweet scent of the wine. Our ancestors kid us not. Indeed!"

Back at Luoyang, Linghu Chong had listened to Elder Bamboo-Green teaching and explaining the subject of wine and had mastered a great deal of knowledge about the origin, the smell, the method of winemaking and storing procedures of the many kinds of famous wines, yet he knew nothing about wine vessels. And now when he listened to Zu Qianqiu speak with such fervor and assurance, he couldn't help the feeling of suddenly seeing the light.

"As for Grape Wine, the answer is naturally the Luminous Cup. The ancients wrote in their poems, '*Wonderful Grape Wine filled the Luminous Cups; I want to drink but the sound of Pipa*[32] *is already calling me to my horseback.*'[33] Grape Wine has this gaudy kind of reddish color, which doesn't really promote the kind of heroic spirit us men should have shown when we drink it. But after we pour the Grape Wine into the Luminous Cup, the color of the wine is now no different from the color of blood. Drinking wine is almost like drinking blood. Yue Fei wrote in his poem, '*With soaring aspirations I eat my foe's flesh to rid my hunger; amid my talk and my smile I drink the enemy's blood to rid my thirst.*'[34] How brave and heroic!"

Linghu Chong nodded again and again. He had very little education in literature, so when he listened to Zu Qianqiu quoting various poems he wasn't very clear as to what each sentence really meant. But when he heard the last one, "*amid my talk and my smile I drink the enemy's blood to rid my thirst*", he agreed wholeheartedly that this line indeed showed ultimately heroic spirit between the words, and could invoke great inspiration from the listeners.

Zu Qianqiu pointed at another wine jar and went on. "As for Sorghum Wine, it is the most ancient wine in human history. Yidi invented the method of wine brewing back in the Xia Dynasty when Yu was the king.[35] Yu drank the wine and really loved the taste of it. Guess what? That wine was none other than this Sorghum Wine. Brother Linghu, ordinary people are so shortsighted. They only know that King Yu achieved a great deal in flood-control, which benefited the entire afterworld, but they didn't know that flood-control was so insignificant compared to the real accomplishment he had achieved. Do you know what his real accomplishment was?"

"Making Wine!" Linghu Chong and the Peach Valley's Six Fairies answered in unison.

"Precisely!" Zu Qianqiu confirmed, and all eight of them laughed out loud.

"To drink the Sorghum Wine, only a Bronze Jue[36] can bring out the ancient meaning of it," Zu Qianqiu continued. "And as for the Rice Wine, even though first-class Rice Wine has a fair taste, it lacks the appropriate amount of sweetness and seems to be thin and weak. We ought to drink it with big ladlers to show the lofty quality."

"I am just a man from the wildness. I had no idea that the relationship between wine and wine vessels actually calls for such careful study," Linghu Chong said.

Zu Qianqiu gave a gentle pat on a wine jar that had the words "Hundred-Grass Wine" written on it.

"In order to make the Hundred-Grass Wine, one must collect a variety of grasses and then soak them in top quality wine, that's why it has a kind of faint, pleasant scent, the kind you would smell on a spring outing to the wilderness,

that will make you tipsy even before you drink it. To drink the Hundred-Grass Wine, we ought to use an Age-old Rattan Cup. 'Hundred-year-old rattan, carved into a cup, when used to drink the Hundred-Grass Wine, enhancing the wonderful fragrance it does.'"

"Hundred-year-old rattan, that had be precious," Linghu Chong commented.

"Brother Linghu, you've said it wrong!" Zu Qianqiu disagreed with a stern countenance. "Compared to the hundred-year-old rattan, hundred-year-old wine is even more precious. Think about it, you can just go to a remote mountain area if you want to look for hundred-year-old rattan. But in regard to the hundred-year-old wine, everybody wants to drink it. After you drink it, it's gone, yet even after you drink a thousand times using the Age-Old Rattan Cup, the cup is still there, nothing less, nothing more."

"You are absolutely right! I am so very ignorant. Thank you for the advice," Linghu Chong replied.

Throughout the entire time, Yue Buqun had paid great attention to Zu Qianqiu's every single word. He could tell that Zu was definitely exaggerating, yet his words seemed reasonable. Seeing how Branch Fairy, Trunk Fairy, and the rest Fairies pick up the jar of Hundred-Grass Wine and splash it all over the table when they poured it, as if it were just some kind of cheap wine, even though Yue Buqun was not fond of drinking, he could still smell the pure and nice aroma of the wine assailing his nostrils. He knew that the wine must have been top quality, and it was such a pity for the Peach Valley's Six Fairies to abuse it like that.

"And to drink the Shaoxing Red Wine, we ought to use an Ancient-china Cup," Zu Qianqiu went on explaining, "and it would be better to use a china cup from the Northern Song Dynasty. A china cup from the Southern Song Dynasty would be alright, but it certainly has the sign of waning. As for china cups from the Yuan Dynasty, they are inevitably uncouth.[37] And for the Pear-Blossom Wine of course it has to be the Emerald Cup. Bai Juyi wrote in his poem *Spring View of Hangzhou*, '*The red sleeves of the silk weaving girls reflected the persimmon leaves, and the emerald green flag of the wine shop sets off the*

Pear-Blossom Wine.'[38] Think about it, the wine shop in Hangzhou was selling the Pear-Blossom Wine and they had an emerald green flag hanging outside, which set off the Pear-Blossom Wine wonderfully. Then to drink the Pear-Blossom Wine, of course we have to use an Emerald Cup. And to drink the Jade-dew Wine, it ought to be the Glazed Cup. There are many small bubbles in the Jade-dew Wine, and only by drinking it with the crystal Glazed Cup can we appreciate the beauty of it."

"Toot toot toot! Aren't you just blowing your own trumpet!" a girl's voice suddenly rose. It was Yue Lingshan, who also made a face while speaking.

"Lingshan, don't be rude. What Mr. Zu said is very reasonable," Yue Buqun admonished.

"How can it be reasonable? Wine can add to the fun, and that's all it's good for. Drinking days and nights yet with so many rules, a true hero would never do that," Lingshan disagreed.

"Miss, you said it wrong!" Zu Qianqiu wagged his head back and forth. "Liu Bang, the first emperor of the Han Dynasty. Isn't he a great hero? If it weren't because he became drunk and beheaded the white snake, how could he have established the Hang Dynasty that lasted several hundred years?[39] Isn't Fan Kuai a great hero? That day in the Banquet of Hongman, General Fan sliced the meat on his shield and drank the wine using a big ladler. Isn't that the true display of heroic spirits?"[40]

"Mister Zu, you know these are top quality wines, and you just mentioned that heroes also love drinking, then how come you are not drinking?" Linghu Chong asked with a grin.

"I've said it earlier. Without appropriate wine vessels we would just be abusing these great wines," Zu Qianqiu answered.

"You are really boasting in the most fantastic terms when you talked about the Emerald Cup, Luminous Cup, and whatever else," Trunk Fairy mocked. "Where are you going to find cups like that? Even if those cups do exist, there is probably only one or two apiece. Who's able to collect all of them?"

“An elegant gentleman, who has poetic temperament, who cares about savoring the great taste of wine, would, of course, have them. The way you guys drink is like cows or donkeys drinking out of a manger, then, of course, any kind of coarse cups or bowls would do for you,” Zu Qianqiu mocked back.

“Are you an elegant gentleman?” Leaf Fairy challenged.

“Well, not too much, yet not too little, I do possess some quality of an elegant gentleman,” Zu Qianqiu answered.

Leaf Fairy burst into loud laughter. “Then the kind of wine cups you just described for these eight kinds of wine, how many do you have with you?” he asked.

“Well, not too many, yet not too few, I do have one for each kind,” Zu Qianqiu answered.

“Braggart! Braggart!” the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies shouted in unison!

“How about a bet?” Root Fairy suggested. “If you have these eight kinds of wine cups with you, I’ll eat them one by one. What if you don’t have them? What’s that going to be?”

“Then I’ll eat all these wine cups and bowls here on the table one by one, also, as a forfeit!” Zu Qianqiu vowed.

“Wonderful! Wonderful! Let’s see how he is going to…,” the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies all cheered.

But before they even finished their sentence, Zu Qianqiu had already reached into his chest pocket and took out a wine cup. Tender and smooth, it turned out to be a Jade Cup.

Greatly astonished, the six Fairies swallowed the rest of the sentence back down their throats. Staring at Zu Qianqiu in shock, they watched him taking out one wine cup after another continuously. Among them were indeed the Emerald Cup, the Rhino-horn Cup, the Age-Old Rattan Cup, the Bronze Jue, the Luminous Cup, the Glazed Cup, and the Ancient-china Cup. After taking out these eight wine cups, Zu Qianqiu didn’t stop and kept taking out more and

more wine cups. There were the shinning Golden Cup, the exquisitely carved Silver Cup, and the multicolored and naturally patterned Stone Cup. Furthermore, there were the Ivory Cup, the Tiger-tooth Cup, the Cowskin Cup, the Bamboo-tube Cup, the Rosewood Cup, and so on and so on. Some were large, and some were small; each looked different from the other ones. Everybody was dumbstruck; neither had expected that the poor and pedantic scholar had so many wine cups hidden in his chest pocket.

"What about it?" Zu Qianqiu asked Root Fairy in a perky voice.

Root Fairy's face saddened. "I lost! Fine, I'll eat eight wine cups," he said.

Picking up the Age-old Rattan Cup, Root Fairy bit it hard. Crack, the cup broke into two. He stuck the smaller half into his mouth, and after some loud chewing and crunching he swallowed the pieces down his throat.

Nobody had expected him to really eat the wine cup, and within seconds, he had already swallowed down half of the wine cup. Everyone gasped in astonishment. Extending his arm out, Root Fairy reached for the Rhino-horn Cup this time.

Suddenly, Zu Qianqiu whisked with his left hand and struck toward Root Fairy's wrist. Root Fairy dropped his right hand slightly and then grabbed back at Zu Qianqiu's wrist to counter, but Zu Qianqiu flicked his middle finger swiftly toward Root Fairy's palm. Stunned, Root Fairy drew his arm back.

"Don't you want me to eat them?" he asked.

"I give up! You surely have got the fortitude. Let's just say you have already eaten all the eight wine cups. I'd rather keep my cups," Zu Qianqiu replied. Everybody laughed at these words.

Yue Lingshan had been quite scared of the Peach Valley's Six Fairies, at first, but since they showed no sign of vicious or ruthless intentions throughout the time they were on the boat, instead, they always talked and behaved in a funny and affable manner, Yue Lingshan's fear slowly slipped way.

"Ahoy! Does that Age-old Rattan Cup taste any good?" she mustered up her

courage and asked.

Root Fairy smacked his lips loudly and then lapped them with his tongue. “Yuck! What’s good about it? It’s too bitter!”

“Alas, you’ve really messed up my plan! You’ve eaten my Age-old Rattan Cup, what cup am I gonna use for the Hundred-Grass Wine now? Guess we’ll just have to put up with a wooden cup.” Zu Qianqiu frowned.

He took out a handkerchief from his chest pocket. Picking up what’s left of the Age-old Rattan Cup, he began wiping it with the handkerchief. After a short while, he picked the Rosewood Cup up and also wiped it in and out. The handkerchief appeared to be damp and dirty, so the more he wiped the cup with it, the filthier the cup had become. After spending a good while wiping the wooden cup, he finally put the wooden cup back on the table. Lining all eight cups in a row, he put the rest of the wine cups back into his chest pocket and then began pouring the Fen-Wine, Grape Wine, Shaoxing Red Wine, and the rest of the eight different kinds of wine into the eight cups. Then he let out a sigh of relief.

“Brother Linghu, please drink these eight cups of wine one by one. After you finish them, I’ll drink eight cups of wine to accompany you. Let’s savor them carefully and see how different they are from the kind of wine you used to have,” Zu Qianqiu invited.

“Sure!” Linghu Chong answered. He raised the wooden cup and then poured the wine down his throat in a single gulp. Suddenly, a strong flavor of pungency rose from his stomach and completely consumed him. In great shock, Linghu Chong thought to himself, “Why does the wine have such a peculiar taste?”

“These wine cups are truly the most valuable treasures of wine lovers,” Zu Qianqiu exclaimed. “I’ve met some cowards before who dared not to drink the second cup after tasting the strange flavor from the first cup. Through the ages, I yet have the chance to see one who had the courage to finish all eight cups of wine.”

“I don’t have many days to live anyway,” Linghu Chong thought to himself.

“Even if the wines were poisoned, so what? It’s no different to die from poison. Why let him have an excuse to mock me?” So he picked up more cups from the table and drank two more cups of wine. One of them tasted utterly bitter while the other one tasted totally acerbic; neither tasted like good wine. At the time when he raised the fourth cup, Root Fairy suddenly uttered a cry.

“Oh, no! My stomach is burning! There’s fire inside my stomach.”

“You swallowed half of my Age-old Rattan Cup down, how could it not hurt?” Zu Qianqiu grinned. “The age-old rattan is as hard as steel. There’s no way you are going to digest that. You’d better take a lot of cathartic and hope you can get it out of your system. If that’s not gonna work, then you’d have no choice but to ask Killer Doctor Ping One-Finger to cut open your belly and take it out.”

A thought suddenly emerged in Linghu Chong’s mind, “Something has gotten to be seriously wrong with those eight wine cups of his. After Root Fairy swallowed that Age-old Rattan Cup, even if the rattan were really that hard to digest, he should have suffered no more than some stomachache. Why would he get the burning sensation? Hum, a true man will look death calmly in the face. The more lethal his poison is the better. What am I afraid of?” At that thought, he slammed another cup of wine down his throat.

“Big apprentice brother, don’t drink any more of those wines! They are probably poisonous.” Yue Lingshan suddenly spoke out. “You blinded all those people with your sword, better be careful. It’s very likely that they would plot against you for revenge.”

“This Mister here is a man of the forthright kind. I am sure he won’t be plotting against me,” Linghu Chong said as a sad smile flashed across his lips. Deep in his heart, he actually wished that the wines were poisonous, so that they would kill him right after he drank them. “Would little apprentice sister feel the slightest sorrow when she sees my dying body right in front of her eyes?” he wondered as he drank another two cups of wine. The wine in the sixth cup tasted sour and salty, together with some kind of a stinking odor. The taste was not only far from the taste of great wine, it didn’t even qualify the taste of wine.

He couldn't help but frown.

Watching Linghu Chong drinking one cup after another by the side, Trunk Fairy was bursting to give it a try himself. "Let me have these two cups!" he pleaded and reached out for the seventh cup.

Zu Qianqiu waved his folding fan and smacked it at the back of Trunk Fairy's hand.

"Patience! Patience!" he urged with a grin. "You'll have to wait for your turn! Everyone will have to drink all eight cups in sequence to really appreciate the ultimate true taste of wine."

Trunk Fairy could tell that the smack from Zu Qianqiu's folding fan had carried a tremendous amount of force. If it had landed on the target squarely, the force probably was powerful enough to smash his bones. Flipping his palm over, he grabbed at the folding fan and shouted at the same time.

"I'd rather drink this one first! What are you going to do about it?"

Zu Qianqiu's folding fan had been folded into the shape of a short stick, but when Trunk Fairy's hand was just about to touch the fan, it suddenly opened up abruptly, and the edge of the fan shot swiftly toward Trunk Fairy's index finger. That caught Trunk Fairy by complete surprise. He drew his hand back hastily and the shot barely missed his finger, but numbness still came from his index finger as the force carried by the fan swept by. Crying out loud in shock, he took a step back.

"Brother Linghu, hurry up with those last two cups of wine!" Zu Qianqiu urged hurriedly.

Giving it no more thoughts, Linghu Chong also drank up the last two cups of wine. Neither of the two cups of wine had that stinking odor. But one was so spicy that it almost felt as if someone was slicing Linghu Chong's throat with a knife, while the other one had a very strong smell of herbal medicine. How could these be called wine when their flavors were even stronger than the strongest medicinal herb in the world?

Seeing the strange expression on Linghu Chong's face, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies burst with curiosity! "How does it taste after you drink all eight cups?" they asked eagerly.

"Eight cups all together, taste the ultimate wonder of the Heaven. That's recorded in ancient scripts," Zu Qianqiu rushed to answer before Linghu Chong had a chance.

"That's baloney! What ancient scripts?" Trunk Fairy rebuffed.

All of a sudden, four shadows leapt forward and each grabbed onto one of Zu Qianqiu's limbs. Nobody had a clue as to what kind of odd signal Trunk Fairy must have given out that had prompted the sudden attack. The techniques of the Six Fairies were lightning fast yet utterly strange. When they suddenly charged at Zu Qianqiu completely out of the blue, even though Zu Qianqiu had excellent Kung Fu skills, himself, he still couldn't escape. Within a fraction of a second, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies had already lifted Zu Qianqiu off the ground by his four limbs. Having witnessed the terrifying scene when the Peach Valley's Six Fairies ripped Cheng Buyou into pieces, members of the Huashan School couldn't help but cry in terror. In the split second, an idea suddenly flashed by Zu Qianqiu's mind like a lightning. He shouted out loudly.

"The wine is poisonous! Don't you want the antidote?"

The four Fairies that had grabbed onto Zu Qianqiu's four limbs all had quite some wine. At the words "the wine is poisoned," they were all seized by surprise.

That brief hesitation from the four Fairies was exactly what Zu Qianqiu needed. "Farts! Farts!" he cried out loudly.

The four Fairies only felt that something all of a sudden started to slip away from their grips. A loud exploding sound followed immediately after. The next thing they know was that a big hole suddenly emerged in the boat's mat roofing and Zu Qianqiu had escaped through the opening. Both Root Fairy and Branch Fairy found themselves empty-handed while Flower Fairy had a stinking sock and Leaf Fairy had a stinking and muddy shoe in their hands. The Peach

Valley's Five Fairies also moved speedily. Everyone on the boat only saw a blur and the five had already leapt ashore. But Zu Qianqiu seemed to have vanished into thin air. Just when the five Fairies were about to chase after him using their Qing-Gong techniques, they heard somebody yelling from the far end of the street.

"Zu Qianqiu, you god damned rascal! Give me back my pills! If any pill is missing, I'll rip all your tendons out and skin you alive!" the man yelled loudly as he dashed closer.

Hearing someone trashing Zu Qianqiu like that, the five Fairies felt great satisfaction and all decided to give up the chase, so they could take a good look at this man who would truly deserve to be called a friend. Standing still, all five of them stared toward the newcomer curiously.

A meatball rolled toward them, panting heavily along the way. Only after it finally rolled almost right next to the five Fairies were they able to recognize that the meatball was actually a man. The man was too short and too fat. It would be even generous to call him a human. He had no neck. His broad and oblate shaped head just sat on his shoulders directly as if somebody had smashed his head with a hammer at the time when he was born, which squashed his head down and stretched his cheeks, mouth, and nose horizontally.

No one could help but laugh inwardly, thinking, "That Ping One-Finger is also a short fatty, but he would certainly pale into insignificance by comparison with this fellow."

Ping One-Finger was short with an ultra-broad shoulder, but this man also had ultra-thick chest and back. And on top of that, his arms and legs were so short as if he only had the lower arm but without the upper arm and the belly without the underbelly.

The man walked in front of the boat with arms akimbo and then asked arrogantly as if he had the ultimate seniority, "Where is Zu Qianqiu the dirty rascal hiding?

"That dirty rascal ran away. He surely runs fast! I bet you won't be able to

catch up with him rolling so slowly like that," Root Fairy answered with a grin.

The man shot a glare at Root Fairy with his small and circular eyes and let out a grunt. But suddenly he started yelling again.

"My pills! My pills!"

Giving the ground a hard stamp, the meatball sprang onto the boat and then rolled into the boat's hold. He first sniffed around a little before picking up an empty wine cup on the table and then put it next to his nose to breathe in. Suddenly, his complexion changed dramatically. Not very complementary to start with, now after the change, his face had transformed into something completely grotesque and impossible to describe in words. Apparently his grievance had reached the extreme. He picked the rest seven cups up one after another and gave each one a good snuffle before murmuring, "My pills!" After he said "my pills" eight times, the sorrow on his face looked so sad that no one could even bare to look into his face. Suddenly he flopped down onto the floor and burst into loud cries.

The Peach Valley's Five Fairies became even more curious. They gathered around the man in a circle and all started talking at once.

"Why are you crying?"

"Did Zu Qianqiu bully you?"

"Don't feel bad. We'll find this dirty rascal and rip him into four pieces to vent your anger."

"My pills are gone. He blended my pills in his wine and drank all of them. Even if I could kill…kill this dirty rascal, it's already…already…too late," the man replied in sobs.

Linghu Chong suddenly thought of something. "What kind of pills are they?" he asked.

"It took me a total of twelve years to collect the thousand-year old Ginseng, Tuckahoe, Glossy Ganoderma, Pilose Antler of young stags, Polygonum Multiflorum, Bear Gallbladder, Pseudo-Ginseng, Muskiness, and other precious

medicaments. Then after nine steps of braising and nine times of solarization, I was finally able to refine those "Life-Extending Eight Pills" that had the power of bringing the dying back to life. But who had expected that god damned Zu Qianqiu would steal them from me and then blend them in the wine for a drink?" He shed some more tears.

Linghu Chong was astonished. "Do these eight pills of yours taste the same?" he asked.

"Of course not. Some had a stinking odor, some tasted extremely bitter. Some were so spicy that you'd almost feel like a knife had just slit your throat, and some had a strong flavor of pungency, so strong that you'd think you were on fire. If anyone takes the 'Life-Extending Eight Pills,' then no matter how bad his internal wounds or external wounds are, for sure he would come back to life," the man explained.

"Oh, no!" Linghu Chong cried as he struck his thigh with his palm. "That Zu Qianqiu stole your Life-Extending Eight Pills, but he didn't take them himself. Instead…instead…"

"Instead what?" the man asked.

"Instead, he blended them in the wine and then fooled me into drinking all of them down with the wine. I had no idea that the wine had contained precious medicinal pills. I actually thought he had poison in the wine," Linghu Chong replied.

"Poison in the wine? Poison my ass!" the man cursed in fury. "Did you really take my Life-Extending Eight Pills?" he asked, his eyes blazing.

"Zu Qianqiu filled eight cups with good wines for me to drink. Some did taste very bitter, and some did have a terrible odor, some surely felt like somebody slit my throat, and some did have a burning sensation. But to be very honest with you, I didn't see any pills at all," Linghu Chong explained.

The man shot a nasty glare toward Linghu Chong and his fat face twitched again and again. All of a sudden, he uttered a loud cry as he sprang onto his feet and then charged at Linghu Chong.

Ever since the man put a wicked look on his face, the Peach Valley's Five Fairies had been watching out for him. So as soon as he sprang off the floor, four out of the five Fairies had reached their hands out in blazing speed and each grabbed hold of one of his four limbs.

"Don't hurt him!" Linghu Chong shouted out in a hurry.

But the strange thing was that after the four Fairies had grabbed onto his two wrists and two ankles, his four limbs actually retracted toward his torso and he looked even more like a meatball. In great surprise, the four Fairies gave a loud shout and then pulled harder. The more they pulled, the longer the man's four limbs extended, and soon his upper arms and thighs all extended out from within his body just like when a tortoise's four limbs were extending out from within the shell.

"Don't hurt him!" Linghu Chong shouted again.

The Peach Valley's Four Fairies relaxed the pulling a little bit. The man's four limbs immediately retracted back and he became a meatball, once again.

"This is so interesting! This is so interesting! What kind of Kung Fu is this?" Fruit Fairy shouted out loudly while still lying on the stretcher.

The Peach Valley's Four Fairies gave it a good pull, and the man's arms and legs again went a few feet longer. Yue Lingshan and the bunch of female apprentices simply couldn't help but giggle by the side.

"Hey, don't you think you look more handsome this way when we stretch your arms, legs, and your body longer?" Root Fairy joked.

"Oh, no!" the man screamed.

"Why?" the Peach Valley's Four Fairies asked in shock, and naturally their grips relaxed slightly from the distraction.

The man suddenly pulled hard and his limbs slipped out from the four Fairies' grips. In the echoing of a loud bang, he had cracked open a large hole in the bottom of the boat and escaped into the river. Everyone cried in astonishment, and water instantly gushed out of the hole and into the boat.

“Get the luggage and jump ashore,” Yue Buqun shouted the order.

The hole on the bottom of the boat was about four feet long and four feet wide. Water gushed in very quickly and only moments later, the water in the boat’s cabin had already risen to knee’s high. Fortunately, the boat was next to the bank and everyone made it ashore safely. Watching the boat sink slowly under the water, the boatman didn’t know what to do and only froze there looking dreadfully worried.

“Don’t be troubled. How much is your boat worth? We’ll pay you double that,” Linghu Chong comforted him. In the meantime, he was deeply puzzled, “I have never met Zu Qianqiu before. Why would he steal these precious medicinal pills and then trick me into taking them?” He tried to slightly redirect his inner energy. A warm feeling rose from his lower stomach, but the eight energy streams still roamed about inside him uncontrollably.

Lao Denuo found another boat to hire and directed people to load the luggage onto the boat. Linghu Chong took out a few of the silver ingots, the ones he had received earlier and had no clue as to who they had come from, and then gave them to the boatman who had lost the boat.

Yue Buqun found himself full of unease at what had happened. It seemed that there were simply too many eccentrics around here. None of the people who had visited had been very frank with them, and accidents just kept happening one after another. It would be the best for them to leave this troubled place as soon as possible. But since it was completely dark already, and it would be too risky to sail in the torrential river at night, he had to temporarily hold on to that thought and rested in the boat for the night.

And as regard to the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies, having failed twice to secure their prisoners and letting Zu Qianqiu and the Meatball Man escape one after another, they certainly had a hard time. This was something that had never happened to them before. So being the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies, the six brothers kept blowing their own trumpet and tried hard to prettify themselves from the incidents. After some great efforts and still failing to justify themselves, very unhappily, they drank some wine and finally went to bed themselves.

Chapter 15: Medicine

Translated by Lanny Lin



The girl was about seventeen years old. Her bloodless face rested on the pillow, and her long hair spread over the blanket. "Dad!" said she in a dim voice, yet without opening her eyes.

Yue Buqun lay in the cabin. Sound of the river waves beating the shore echoed in his ears as his many thoughts also whirled around in his head. Slowly, he fell into a state of ooziness when suddenly something caught his attention – the sounds of footsteps coming closer and closer from ashore. Sitting up from his bed, he looked out through a crack of the window. Under the misty

moonlight he could vaguely see two shadows running towards the boat from afar. One of them raised his right hand, and at that signal, both of them stopped, still dozens of feet away from the boat. Knowing that the two of them would undoubtedly be talking in whispers, Yue Buqun started loading his "Divine Art of the Violet Twilight", and instantly his sense of vision and hearing sharpened dramatically and the distance he could see and hear increased considerably.

"That's the boat," one of the men whispered. "I made a mark on the mat of the boat earlier. Right after that old fellow from the Huashan School hired the boat. It's gotten to be it."

"That's great! Let's report back to Uncle-Master Zhu then. Senior apprentice brother, when did our 'Hundred-Toxic Faction' start a feud with the Huashan School? Why is Uncle-Master Zhu going through so much trouble to intercept them in such a big way?" the other one asked in whispers.

As soon as Yue Buqun heard the words "Hundred-Toxic Faction," his heart skipped a beat as a slight chill shot down his spine. Because of the slight distraction, the power of the "Divine Art of the Violet Twilight" decreased, and all he could pick out were pieces of words from the conversation.

"…not intercepting…Uncle Master Zu owed someone a favor, and that someone has asked him to inquire about somebody…it wasn't…" the previous one replied.

The man spoke in such a low voice that Yue Buqun could only hear fractions of the sentence and couldn't put the meaning of the words together. By the time he reloaded his "Divine Art of the Violet Twilight," all he heard were sounds of footsteps descending further and further. The two men had faded into the darkness.

"How did our Huashan School start a feud with the 'Hundred-Toxic Faction'?" Yue Buqun thought to himself. "That Uncle-Master Zhu they mentioned most probably is the Head Master of the 'Hundred-Toxic Faction.' This man has a nickname called 'Non-lethal Man.' It is said that this man possesses outstanding skills in the art of poisoning. To kill someone with poison is simple. Anybody

can achieve that easily. But when this man poisons someone, the victim won't die, instead, he will feel such great torment as if he has been cut thousands of times or as if there are tens of thousands of bugs chewing and feasting on his flesh. The misery is going to be so immense that the victim would have been better off dead, yet he won't even have enough strength left to commit suicide and would have no other choice but to suffer more. Together with the 'Five-Sylph Sect' in Yunnan Province, the 'Hundred-Toxic Faction' has been named the Ultimate Two Poisonous Clans in the Martial World. Although it is said that the 'Hundred-Toxic Faction' is still inferior to the 'Five-Sylph Sect,' it is certainly no trivial matter. Why would this Master Zhu give me trouble in a big way? Who has asked him to do it?"

Yue Buqun pondered the question over and over but could only come up with two explanations: number one, Feng Buping of the Sword-Branch must have asked the Hundred-Toxic Faction to give trouble to him; number two, among the fifteen assassins Linghu Chong had blinded, someone must have been friends with the Hundred-Toxic Faction.

Suddenly a girl's whispering voice from ashore caught his attention.

"Does your family really have that whatever 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' after all?"

It was the voice of his daughter – Yue Lingshan. Yue Buqun didn't even have to listen on to figure out whom she was talking to. It of course had to be Lin Pingzhi. They must have sneaked ashore earlier sometime. Yue Buqun suddenly realized that his daughter's feelings towards Lin Pingzhi had been growing day after day lately. The two dared not show their affection during the day, afraid that people would make fun of them; so instead, they went ashore for a date late at night. If it weren't because he had detected enemy coming ashore and used his "Divine Art of the Violet Twilight" to spy on them, this would have certainly slipped by him. To load the "Divine Art of the Violet Twilight" would exhaust a good amount of inner energy. He wouldn't have used it under ordinary circumstances. He certainly didn't expect to find his daughter's little secret together with the origin of the enemy? Then he heard Lin Pingzhi's voice.

“We do have the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Art’ and I’ve shown you the moves several times. But we really don’t have the sword art manuscript.”

“Then why do your grandpa and your two uncles keep suspecting big apprentice brother for embezzling your sword art manuscript?” Yue Lingshan asked.

“Well, they suspected him, but I didn’t,” Lin Pingzhi answered.

“Humph, how convenient! Let others suspect for you and save yourself the trouble,” Yue Lingshan said.

“If my family really had some kind of brilliant sword art manuscript, our Fortune Prestige Escort House wouldn’t have been bullied so much by the Qingcheng Sword School and my family wouldn’t have been broken up.” Lin Pingzhi sighed.

“That’s true. Then when your grandpa and your uncles suspected big apprentice brother, why didn’t you defend him against the charge?” Yue Lingshan asked.

“I didn’t hear my mom and dad’s words with my own ears. I wouldn’t have any ground to defend him from,” Lin Pingzhi argued.

“So you do suspect big apprentice brother after all,” Yue Lingshan concluded.

“Don’t say that. If big apprentice brother hears this, it will certainly hurt the brotherhood of fellow apprentices,” Lin Pingzhi suggested.

“Why do you have to put up so much affectation?” Yue Lingshan sneered. “Either you do suspect him or you don’t. If I were you, I’d have asked big apprentice brother a long time ago.” She paused for a second and then spoke again. “You are so much like my father. Both of you suspect big apprentice brother in your hearts and believe that he had embezzled your family’s sword art manuscript….”

“Master suspects him, too?” Lin Pingzhi intercepted.

“If you don’t suspect him, why did you use the word ‘too’? Didn’t I say that your personality is almost identical to my father’s? Both of you keep your

thoughts to yourself but never speak it out directly." Yue Lingshan chuckled.

Suddenly, a croaked voice roared from the boat right next to the boat of the Huashan members.

"You shameless scoundrels! What a bunch of crap! Linghu Chong is a true hero. Why would he want your god damned sword art manuscript? Do you know what kind of lowlifes I hate the most? The kind that talks garbage behind one's back!"

His voice exploded like thunders from the sky. Not only were passengers from the many boats along the river bank waken up, even the many birds sleeping on the tree branches along the river bank were startled and began chirping loudly. Immediately following the shout, a huge shadow leapt out of the boat and glided toward Lin Pingzhi and Yue Lingshan rapidly.

Neither Lin Pingzhi nor Yue Lingshan had brought a sword when they came ashore, so both of them could only rush to defend themselves with kicks and punches. As soon as Yue Buqun heard the man's roar, he could tell that this man must have had resourceful inner energy. And the leap and the glide the man demonstrated clearly showed that he possessed first-class Kung Fu skills. Seeing that the man had launched the attack against his daughter, Yue Buqun shouted out in desperation.

"Please, show mercy!"

Hastily, Yue Buqun threw himself at the window and crashed through it to leap toward the riverbank. Still in the mid air, he could already see that the giant man had grabbed hold of both Lin Pingzhi and Yue Lingshan and darted forward with one in each hand.

Yue Buqun was astounded. As soon as his right foot touched the ground, he dashed forward using his Qing-Gong techniques at once. Wielding a move named "White Aurora Shooting the Sun," he thrust his sword toward the man's back.

The man had a very big and tall body, so of course his steps were much bigger than average. He took a step forward and the stab from Yue Buqun was out of

range. Without any delay, Yue Buqun followed with a move called “Zhong-Ping Sword” and shot his blade forward a second time. The giant man just happened to take another giant step forward, and once again the attack missed the target.

“Look out!” Yue Buqun let out a crisp roar and shouted out as he stabbed his sword out swiftly using a move named “Cool Breeze Brings Comfort.”

When the tip of the blade was within one foot from the man’s back, suddenly, a strong wind embraced Yue Buqun as someone charged against him from the side, poking two fingers towards his eyes viciously. It was at the end of the street; a row of houses by the street blocked the moonlight and cast a long shadow on the street. Yue Buqun quickly turned his body aside and dodged the attack. Swinging his long sword with an angle, he sliced the blade out as his counterattack before even catching a glimpse of the enemy. The attacker lowered his head and then stepped forward with a clawed hand striking towards Yue Buqun’s Zhong-Wan Acupoint on his stomach. Yue Buqun threw a front kick. The man spun around and struck toward his back. Without turning back, Yue Buqun shot a speedy thrust backward with a backhand, but the man dodged the thrust once again and then charged forward to punch at Yue Buqun’s chest. Yue Buqun was infuriated. How dare this man be so disrespectful to fight his long sword with bare hands yet using all attacking moves? In the fury, he made a circular motion with the sword and then poked upward all of a sudden toward the enemy’s forehead. In a rush, the man flicked the sword with his finger, which changed the direction of the poke slightly. Following the flow of the force Yue Buqun turned the poke into a slice, and with a slight tearing sound he had chopped the man’s hat off, exposing a shaven head. The man turned out to be a monk. Blood gushed down from his head; obviously, the slice had injured him. Giving the ground a hard push, the monk leapt backward hastily.

Seeing that he fled in the opposite direction from the giant who kidnapped Yue Lingshan, Yue Buqun didn’t chase after him. By then Madam Yue had caught up with him, sword in her hand.

“Where’s Lingshan?” she asked distractedly.

“This way!” Yue Buqun pointed with his left hand and the couple immediately

chased on following the road the giant had taken. But soon the road intersected with many other roads and they couldn't tell which way the enemy had taken.

"What now! What now!" Madam Yue cried in despair.

"The man that kidnapped Lingshan is a friend of Chong. I suppose he…he won't go so far as to hurt Lingshan. Let's go ask Chong to find out more about it," Yue Buqun suggested.

"That's right. That man shouted out loud saying that Lingshan and Pingzhi were defaming Chong. I wonder what made him say that." Madam Yue nodded.

"It's about the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' again," Yue Buqun explained.

When the Yue couple arrived back at the riverbank, they found Linghu Chong and the many apprentices all standing by the river looking deeply concerned. After Yue Buqun and Madam Yue walked back into the middle cabin and were just about to send for Linghu Chong for further inquiries, a voice suddenly rose in a distance from ashore.

"Here's a letter for Yue Buqun."

Lao Denuo and a few male apprentices unsheathed their swords immediately and leapt back ashore. Only moments later, Lao Denuo returned to the cabin and reported.

"Master, we found this piece of cloth under a rock on the ground. The messenger left before we got there." He presented the piece of cloth.

Yue Buqun picked the cloth up and took a good look at it. The cloth was apparently torn from a robe, and someone had written some tremulous words in blood using his finger. It read, "We'll return your stinking daughter on the Five-Tyrant Ridge."

"That monk wrote this," handing the cloth over to his wife, Yue Buqun claimed dryly.

"Whose…whose blood is this?" Madam Yue asked anxiously.

“Don’t worry. I gave him a cut on the forehead,” Yue Buqun comforted her. He turned to the boatman and asked, “How far are we from the Five-Tyrant Ridge?”

“If we set sail early in the morning, after the Copper-Tile Town and the Jiuhe Town, it’s Dongming Town. The Five-Tyrant Ridge is to the east of Dongming next to Heze. It’s right on the border between Henan province and Shandong province. If misters want to go there, we can probably get there by dusk tomorrow,” the boatman answered.

Yue Buqun answered with a hum as he thought to himself, “They are asking me to meet them on the Five-Tyrant Ridge. This is an appointment I simply can’t refuse. But who knows how many people they will have there. Besides, they have Lingshan in their hands. I guess this is a battle I am destined to lose.” He couldn’t help but hesitate.

Suddenly someone shouted from ashore. “Peach Valley’s Six Goblins, you damn buttheads, I am your lord Zhong Kui[41] here to hunt you bunch of goblins down.”

There was simply no way the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies would be taking those words lightly. All six of them instantly cursed back with streams of abuses. Except for Fruit Fairy who couldn’t move, the remaining five Fairies all leapt ashore without any delay. What they saw was a man with a needle hat holding a long narrow white banner.[42] At the sight of the five Fairies, the man turned around immediately and started running away.

“Peach Valley’s Six Goblins are all cowards! I dare you to come after me,” he shouted without slowing down his steps.

Bellowing furiously, Root Fairy and the rest of the four Fairies darted after the man. But the man certainly had first-class Qing-Gong skills. Within seconds, the six of them had been swallowed by the darkness.

At the time, Yue Buqun and the many Huashan School members had all come ashore. Suddenly Yue Buqun shouted.

“This is a trick to lure us away. Get back to the boat right away, everybody.”

Right at the moment, a ball shaped shadow suddenly rolled out from nowhere and grabbed onto Linghu Chong’s collar in a swift maneuver.

“You come with me!” he shouted. It was none other than that meatball man.

In his tight grips, Linghu Chong had no way of defending himself. Suddenly, another man dashed out from behind a street corner and threw a flying kick toward the meatball man. It was Branch Fairy. Turned out that after he chased after the man with the needle hat for a few hundred feet, he suddenly remembered that his brother Fruit Fairy was still onboard. Afraid that his brother might be taken away by that god damned “Lord Zhong Kui,” he rushed back in guard. And when he saw that the meatball man had taken Linghu Chong prisoner, he immediately rushed over in rescue.

The meatball man instantly dropped Linghu Chong and, in a flash, had entered the cabin and leapt by Fruit Fairy’s bed. Lifting his right foot, he assumed a posture of stepping down on Fruit Fairy’s chest.

“Don’t hurt my brother!” Branch Fairy shouted in shock.

“Old Man is calling the shot here. Why do I have to listen to you?” the meatball man mocked.

Wasting no time, Branch Fairy leapt into the cabin and with a quick pull, he had both Fruit Fairy and the bedplate in his arms. That was exactly what the meatball man had wanted – to draw him away from Linghu Chong. Leaping back ashore speedily, he had Linghu Chong in his grips once again. Throwing Linghu Chong onto his shoulders, he ran away in a scoot.

Branch Fairy suddenly remembered. Ping One-Finger had asked them, the five brothers, to take good care of Linghu Chong, and now Linghu Chong had just been kidnapped. How would they ever justify themselves to Ping One-Finger? Certainly, Doctor Ping would ask them to kill Fruit Fairy as the punishment. But if he left Fruit Fairy unattended, how would Fruit Fairy be able to defend himself at all in his injured state if any enemy were to attack him? At that thought, he held Fruit Fairy in his arms and chased after the meatball man,

at once.

Yue Buqun waved a beckon to his wife. “You take care of the apprentices. I’ll go take a look,” he said.

Madam Yue nodded. Both of them knew too well that with so many tough enemies hidden in the dark, if both of them were to chase after the enemy, perhaps all the apprentices would be in harm’s way.

The meatball man’s Qing-Gong was really far less than that of the Branch Fairy, but with Linghu Chong on his shoulder, he was able to run with all his might, while Branch Fairy didn’t want to risk aggravating Fruit Fairy’s wounds and had to carry Fruit Fairy with both arms while running in steady steps, thus simply couldn’t gain any distance in the chase. Yue Buqun also used his Qing-Gong techniques and gradually caught up with them. Then, he was able to pick out Branch Fairy’s shouting voice, bellowing again and again, demanding the meatball man to let Linghu Chong go, or else, he wouldn’t let it go at that. Even though Fruit Fairy couldn’t move his body, he definitely didn’t want to give his mouth a rest and kept arguing with Branch Fairy along the way.

“Even if you really can catch up with him, none of our other brothers are here, what’cha gonna do? And if there’s nothing you can do about it, what you just said, that you wouldn’t let it go at that, is only bluffing then,” he said.

“Even if I am bluffing, it will at least scare the enemy and slow him down. It’s still better than not bluffing,” Branch Fairy argued.

“Can’t you tell that the meatball is still maintaining a good running speed and is not slowing down at all? I don’t think your bluffing is getting us anywhere,” Fruit Fairy mocked.

“Well, he hasn’t slowed down yet, but trust me, he will slow down after a while,” Branch Fairy disagreed. Even with Fruit Fairy in his arms and while debating endlessly, he was still able to maintain his speed and showed no sign of slowing down.

One after another, running in a straight line, the three of them kept running toward the northeast, and the road gradually turned into a rugged and rough

mountain path.

Yue Buqun suddenly thought of something. “If the meatball man had set up an ambush here in the valley, and as soon as I run into their trap, the many elite fighters suddenly launch an all out attack, it would be extremely dangerous.”

At the thought, he slowed down and pondered over the possibilities, meanwhile, the meatball man had run toward a house by the hillside and quickly climbed over a wall into the house. After a quick check around, Yue Buqun resumed the chase. By then, carrying Fruit Fairy in his arms, Branch Fairy had also climbed over the wall and went in. Suddenly he uttered a loud cry, apparently falling into some kind of a trap. Yue Buqun sneaked closer to the wall and then heard Fruit Fairy’s voice.

“Didn’t I tell you before to watch out for yourself? See, you just wouldn’t listen to me. Well, I guess you like being trapped in this fishing net like a big fish!”

“First of all, it’s TWO big fish, not A big fish. Secondly, when the hell did you tell me to watch out?” Branch Fairy said sulkily.

“Remember that time we went to that courtyard to steal guavas on the tree when we were still kids, and I told you to watch out for yourself. Don’t you remember?” Fruit Fairy reminded him.

“That was like thirty years ago. What has that gotten anything to do with right now?” Branch Fairy disputed.

“Of course it does. That time you were so careless and fell off the tree. Then you got caught and took a good beating. Only after big brother, second brother, fourth brother, and fifth brother came by in time were they able to rescue you and kill that entire family. Now you are being careless again and got caught again,” Fruit Fairy said.

“What’s the big deal? At the most we’ll just have to wait till the rest of our brothers get here and kill this entire family, once again,” Branch Fairy replied.

“Humph, you two Peach Valley’s Goblins, even just moments before your own

death you are still thinking about killing people. Now shut the hell up and spare my ears some peace," the meatball man said in a chilling tone. Some muffled voices from Branch Fairy and Fruit Fairy followed and soon they both fell silent. Apparently the meatball man had placed some kind of anesthetics in their mouth to shut them up.

Yue Buqun inclined his head and listened warily for a good while, but all he heard was silence on the other side of the wall. He crept closer to the wall and found a big jujube tree right next to the wall, so he gently leapt up the jujube tree and then looked inside. A small hut stood about a dozen feet from the wall. Since Branch Fairy fell into the fishing net right after he climbed over the wall, Yue Buqun figured that the space between the hut and the wall most probably had all kinds of booby traps. Hiding himself behind the dense leaves of the jujube tree, he loaded the "Divine Art of Violet Twilight" and listened carefully.

The meatball man set Linghu Chong down in a chair. "How the hell are you related to Zu Qianqiu that old rascal?" he asked in a low and deep tone.

"I've only met Zu Qianqiu the first time today. Why should I be related to him?" Linghu Chong asked.

"Even now you are still lying!" the meatball man roared angrily. "Don't forget that you are in my hands now. I guarantee you a most miserable death."

"I accidentally ate your precious catholicon. It's only natural that you are mad at me. But to be honest with you, I really doubt that your pills are as great as how you have described them. See, after I took them, there's no improvement at all," Linghu Chong answered with a grin.

"What made you think the result has to be immediate?" the meatball man rebuffed angrily. "The common saying says, 'Illness comes in overwhelming force as if a mountain has collapsed, but will only recede little by little as if reeling the silk thread off a cocoon.' Only after ten to fifteen days will the medicine show its efficacy."

"Then how about we wait ten to fifteen days to find out?" Linghu Chong suggested.

“How about you kiss my ass? You ate my ‘Life-Extending Eight Pills’ on the sly. Old Man is gonna waste you right now,” the meatball man roared furiously.

“But if you waste me right now, then my life would have ended right now. That just proves that your ‘Life-Extending Eight Pills’ doesn’t extend life after all.” Linghu Chong grinned.

“I am killing you. It has nothing to do with the ‘Life-Extending Eight Pills’,” the meatball man replied.

“If you are going to kill me, help yourself. I have no strength left in me and am incapable of self-defense, anyhow.” Linghu Chong sighed.

“Humph, you want it quick? It’s not gonna be that easy. But I have to straighten something out first. God damn it! Zu Qianqiu is my decades-long friend. There has gotten be a good reason behind this that made him betray me. Your Huashan School is worthless in the eyes of the ‘Old Ancestor of the Yellow River,’ so of course he didn’t steal my ‘Life-Extending Eight Pills’ for you just because you are an apprentice of the Huashan School. How odd! Really odd!” While talking to himself, he stamped his feet to the floor angrily.

“Oh, I see. So your nickname is ‘Old Ancestor of the Yellow River.’ Sorry I didn’t know you before,” Linghu Chong said.

“Nonsense! How can I be the ‘Old Ancestor of the Yellow River’ all by myself?” the meatball man chided.

“Why can’t you?” Linghu Chong asked curiously.

“One is surnamed Old and the other is surnamed Zu.[43] It of course takes two to make up the ‘Old Ancestor of the Yellow River.’ You can’t even figure this out. What a moron! I am Old Lord, Old Man, and he is Zu Ancestor, Zu Qianqiu. Since we both live by the Yellow River, that’s why we are called the ‘Old Ancestor of the Yellow River’.”

“Why is one called Old Lord and the other one Zu Ancestor?” Linghu Chong couldn’t help but ask.

“That’s because you are too ignorant and don’t know that there are surnames

like Old or Zu. My last name is Old, my middle name is 'Lord,' and my first name is 'Man.' So when others call my name, they either call me Old Lord, or Old Man…," the meatball man explained.

Linghu Chong simply couldn't help himself and burst into laughter.

"I bet that Zu Qianqiu's middle name is Ancestor then," he said.

"Of course," the meatball man Old Man answered. He paused for a moment and then muttered in surprise, "What? You don't even know Zu Qianqiu's name? Then maybe you are not related to him. Well…wait, are you Zu Qianqiu's son?"

"How the heck did you get that idea? His surname is Zu, and my surname is Linghu. How did you mix that up?" Linghu Chong found this even funnier.

"How bizarre! I went through so much painstaking effort, by hook or by crook, and finally was able to make the 'Life-Extending Eight Pills' so I can use them to cure my darling daughter's illness. If you aren't Zu Qianqiu's son, why would he steal my precious pills to feed you?" Old Man muttered to himself.

By then, Linghu Chong finally became aware. "So these pills of yours, Mister Old, are for your daughter's illness. I am so, so sorry that I had taken them by mistake. May I ask what kind of illness does your daughter have? Why don't you ask the 'Killer Doctor' Doctor Ping to treat her?"

"Pah! Pah!" Old Man spat in aversion. "Consult Ping One-Finger when one has hard-to-cure disease, of course I know that. I live here in Kaifeng, you dummy! He has this rule that after he cures one, another one must be killed to even the numbers. In order to get him to treat my daughter, I went ahead and killed the entire family of five of his in-laws. By then he finally couldn't reject and devoted himself in diagnosing my daughter's disease. He found out that even before my daughter was born, she already had this weird disease, so he prescribed the instruction for the 'Life-Extending Eight Pills' for me. Otherwise how the heck would I know how to make the eight pills?"

The more Linghu Chong heard, the more surprised he felt. "If senior master you wanted Doctor Ping to treat your daughter, why did you kill his in-law's

entire family?" he asked, utterly confused.

"Man, you are so dumb! Let me explain. Ping One-Finger didn't have many foes to start with. And in the last several years, even these few have been wipe out by his patients. Out of all the people in the world, Ping One-Finger hated his mother-in-law the most. But because he fears his wife, he couldn't kill his mother-in-law himself or sent anyone to do it for him. Old Man here is his neighbor, and a fellow martial man in the same region. Of course I know what's on his mind, that's why I did it for him. After I killed the entire family of his in-laws, Ping One-Finger was filled with joy, that's why he worked his butt off to diagnose my daughter's illness and prescribed me the treatment," Old Man explained.

"I see," Linghu Chong nodded. "Master Old, your pills are wonderful medicine, but they don't suit my illness. How is your daughter doing right now? Is there enough time to collect the ingredients and make new pills for her?"

"My daughter will only have one year left at most. What makes you think there's still time to make new pills?" Old Man roared angrily. "Alas, having no other alternatives, I guess I'll just have to give it one last try."

He took out several ropes and firmly tied Linghu Chong's wrists and ankles to the chair. Tearing open Linghu Chong's robe, he exposed Linghu Chong's chest.

"What are you doing?" Linghu Chong asked.

"Don't worry, you'll see," Old Man answered with a fleer.

Picking Linghu Chong up together with the chair, he walked through two rooms, and after lifting a heavy cotton curtain, he went into the third room.

As soon as Linghu Chong entered the room, he felt the extreme mugginess inside. The room was completely sealed; even the windows were covered with cotton sheets, making sure that no wind would sneak in from any crack of the window. Two large basins, filled with charcoal fire, occupied the middle of the room. The bed was by one side of the room with curtains hanging low, almost touching the ground. The entire room was filled with a strong smell of herb medicine.

Old Man set the chair down in front of the bed and then lifted the curtain.

“Not-Dead, my sweet girl, how are you feeling today?” he asked gently.

Linghu Chong couldn’t believe what he had just heard. “What? The name of Old Man’s daughter is ‘Not-Dead’. Wouldn’t that make the girl’s full name Old, Not-Dead? Ah, I see. He mentioned that his daughter had this weird disease even before she was born. He probably was very afraid of losing her, hence naming her ‘Not-Dead’ as a lucky charm, because it would certainly be a very fortunate thing if one can live till he’s very old. Wait, her name starts with the word ‘not’, then she must have been a member of my Master’s apprentice class.”[44] The more he thought about this, the more amused he became.

A girl lay on the bed with her eyes shut tightly. She was probably around seventeen years of age. Her face was completely pale and her long hair scattered all over the quilt looking somewhat yellowish and unhealthy.

“Daddy!” the girl murmured without opening her eyes.

“Not-Dead, my sweetheart! The ‘Life-Extending Eight Pills’ Daddy has been preparing for you are finally ready today. After you take them, you will get better in no time, and you’ll finally be able to get up and play,” Old Man said gently.

The girl answered with a hum and didn’t seem to be very concerned.

Seeing the seriousness of the girl’s disease, Linghu Chong felt very sorry for her.

“Old Man must have loved her daughter so very much that he couldn’t bare to bring himself to speak the truth and had to lie to her to cheer her up,” he thought to himself.

Old Man put his arm under his daughter’s neck. “Why don’t you sit up a little? It will be easier this way when you take the medicine. The medicine didn’t come easy at all. We’d better not waste any of it,” he explained.

The girl slowly sat up and Old Man immediately placed two pillows behind her back to make it a little more comfortable for her. The girl opened her eyes

and then caught the sight of Linghu Chong. Utterly surprised, she rolled her eyes and stared at Linghu Chong.

"Dad, who…who is he?" she asked.

"Him? He is no human. He is medicine," Old Man beamed.

"He is medicine?" the girl was baffled.

"Yes. He is medicine indeed. The effect of the 'Life-Extending Eight Pills' are way too strong for you, my darling, that's why I had this man take the pills instead so I can draw blood from him as medicine for you," Old Man replied.

"Draw blood from him? Won't that inflict pain for him? That's…that's probably not a good idea." The girl murmured.

"This man is a retard. He won't feel any pain," Old Man comforted her.

The girl answered with a hum and then closed her eyes.

With a feeling of mingled shock and fury, Linghu Chong almost broke out swearing, but then on a second thought, he changed his mind.

"Although I didn't take the girl's life-saving pills intentionally, if she dies because of it, there's still fault on my part. Besides, I don't want to live on like this, anyway, so it wouldn't be a bad idea to atone for my mistake by saving her life with my blood." At that thought, he let out a mournful smile and kept his silence.

Old Man stood next to Linghu Chong, ready to seal his Mute Acupoint as soon as the first word came out of his mouth. But to his great surprise, he found a well-composed and unconcerned Linghu Chong smiling at him quietly, instead. Of course, he had no clue that Linghu Chong had remained disheartened ever since Yue Lingshan had fallen in love with someone else. Especially when Linghu Chong heard the mysterious man chiding Yue Lingshan and Lin Pingzhi for defaming him behind his back, and then seeing them dating secretly ashore, he had completely lost the desire to live on and couldn't have cared less about his own life.

"I am going to cut open your heart and use your warm blood to treat my

daughter now. Aren't you afraid?" Old Man asked.

"Why should I be afraid?" Linghu Chong replied calmly.

Old Man cast a side glance at Linghu Chong for a moment, and sure enough, there was no trace of fear to be found anywhere on Linghu Chong's face.

"After I cut your heart open and draw your blood out, you are going to die. Now don't blame me for not telling you that beforehand!" Old Man said.

"Everyone will die sooner or later. It's really not that big of a difference whether one dies a few years earlier or a few years later. It would be great if my blood can save your daughter's life. Definitely beats me dying for nothing, and no good for anybody," Linghu Chong replied indifferently.

He could almost see in his imagination how apathetically Yue Lingshan would have reacted to the news of his death. She might even throw in a few comments on top of that like "that's got to serve him right" or "he's got what he deserves." A strong feeling of self-pity welled up in Linghu Chong's heart.

Old Man raised his thumb. "You are a real tough guy! Man, I've never seen anyone like you before," he praised. "It's too bad that my daughter will definitely die if she doesn't drink your blood, otherwise, I'd have let you go."

Making a trip to the kitchen, Old Man returned with a basin of boiling hot water. While holding a sharp knife with his right hand, he soaked a towel in the hot water using his left hand and then placed it on the pit of Linghu Chong's stomach. Suddenly, Zu Qianqiu's voice shouted from outside.

"Old Man, Old Man, open the door. I've got some good stuff for your daughter Not-Dead."

Old Man frowned. With a swift swing, he sliced the hot towel in half, and then stuffed half of it into Linghu Chong's mouth.

"What good stuff?" he murmured to himself as he set down the knife and the basin before opening the front door to let Zu Qianqiu in.

"Hey, Old Man, how are you going to thank me for this?" Zu Qianqiu spoke excitedly as soon as he entered the room. "It was in such urgency, but I couldn't

find you, so I took your 'Life-Extending Eight Pills' and fooled him into taking them. If you had known about it, you would have brought those catholicons of yours to him, yourself, but I bet you he wouldn't take the pills that way."

"What nonsense…." Old Man rebuked. But after Zu Qianqiu whispered something right next to his ear, he jumped up all of a sudden.

"Is this real? You…you…are not joking about it?" he asked loudly.

"Why would I joke about it? From what I heard, it is absolutely true. Now Old Man, we have been bosom friends for decades long. Tell me, did I do it the way you would have wanted me to or not?" Zu Qianqiu replied.

"Right, right! Damn, damn!" Old Man shouted, stamping his foot to the ground in agony.

"Wow…what's going on? What right and what damn?" Zu Qianqiu was confused.

"You are right, and I am damned!" Old Man answered.

"Why are you damned?" Zu Qianqiu was even more confused.

Dragging Zu by the hand, Old Man led him straight into his daughter's bedroom. As soon as he saw Linghu Chong, he dropped onto his knees and started kowtowing frantically.

"Young Master Linghu, Grandpa Linghu, I must have been so damned blind to have offended you today. Thank Heavens that Zu Qianqiu got here just in time. If I had cut you open and killed you, I would have been damned to hell. Even if someone had roasted me to death and stewed all my fats into grease, it wouldn't have been enough punishment worth of my crime."

With the half towel still stuffed in his mouth, Linghu Chong only answered with some indistinguishable grunts. Zu Qianqiu hurriedly dug the towel out of Linghu Chong's mouth and asked.

"Young Master Linghu, how did you get here?"

"Senior Master Old, please, please get up! I am certainly not worth of such

etiquette from you. You are really embarrassing me now," Linghu Chong spoke hurriedly as soon as the towel was out of his mouth.

"I had no idea about the relationship between Young Master Linghu and my savior. How dare I to offend you like this? Alas, I am such a moron. Alas, I should have gone to hell. Even if I had a hundred daughters and all of them are dying right now, I dare not to even imagine having Young Master Linghu to shed one drop of blood to save their cursed lives," Old Man mumbled on.

"Old Man, why did you tie Young Master Linghu up here?" Zu Qianqiu rolled his eyes.

"Alas, in a word, it was I who have committed all kinds of outrages and perverse acts. Can't you just shut up and spare me some embarrassment?" Old Man replied.

"And why do you have a basin of hot water and a sharp knife over here?" Zu Qianqiu asked again.

Old Man didn't answer his question; instead, he raised his hand and started slapping his own face hard. His fat face already looked like a pumpkin to start with, now after the strong slaps, it puffed up even more.

"I must have been very muddleheaded that I have no clue about what has happened recently. Will you, senior masters, please shed some lights for me?" Linghu Chong beseeched.

"Why don't we talk that over some drinks?" suggested Old Man as he and Zu Qianqiu untied the rope around Linghu Chong hastily.

Casting a side-glance toward the girl on the bed, Linghu Chong asked, "Would your daughter's illness get any worse?"

"No, it will not. Even if it does, alas, well…that's…." Old Man kept murmured to himself words that no one except himself could recognize.

After ushering Linghu Chong and Zu Qianqiu to the front hall, Old Man filled three bowls with wine and also took out a large plate of pork strips to go with the wine. Raising his wine respectfully, he proposed a toast to Linghu Chong.

Linghu Chong poured the wine down his throat in continued gulps. The wine only had a light taste and was quite ordinary. But if compared to the wine he had drunk from Zu Qianqiu's wine cups, it tasted at least ten times better.

"Young Master Linghu, I am such a stupid muddlehead to have offended you. Alas, this…that…really…." Speaking with a terrified face, Old Man was out of words to express his sincere regrets.

"Young Master Linghu is a large-minded man. He won't blame you. Besides, if the 'Life-Extending Eight Pills' of yours are truly effective and could mend Young Master Linghu's health, then you will be the one to thank for," Zu Qianqiu comforted him.

"Well, I don't…deserve the credit. Brother Zu, we've got to thank you," Old Man answered.

Zu Qianqiu grinned. "Since I took your eight pills, I was afraid that it might hinder niece Not-Dead's recovery. Here are some ginsengs for her to take as a tonic." He stooped down and then took out a basket. After removing the lid, he pulled out holds of ginsengs, some thick and some slender. There were perhaps at least ten pounds of them.

"Where did you get so much ginsengs?" Old Man asked.

"Where else? From the medicine shop, of course. I borrowed some," Zu Qianqiu answered with a mischievous grin.

"Like when Liu Bei borrowed the city of Jinzhou,[45] there's no returning," Old Man burst into loud laughter. Even though he forced a smile, he still couldn't completely hide the grief and worries written on his face.

"Mister Old and Mister Zu," Linghu Chong said, "although you had good intentions trying to mend my injures, one of you tricked me and the other one tied me up. Now isn't that a bit disrespectful for me?"

Hearing that, both Old Man and Zu Qianqiu stood up immediately and bowed to Linghu Chong with their hands folded in front. "Young Master Linghu, we are so sorry. You can punish us anyway you see fit; we certainly deserve it," they

answered in unison.

"Fine! I have a question. You must give me a straight answer. Will you please tell me who is behind all these that have made you show such great respect to me?" Linghu Chong asked.

Old Man and Zu Qianqiu exchanged a stare at each other.

"Well…that…that's your question?" Old Man murmured.

"Young Master Linghu, of course you know this person. Please forgive us for daring not to mention this person's name," Zu Qianqiu answered after a pause.

"But I swear that I don't know who he is," Linghu Chong assured them. He couldn't help but ponder. "Is it Grand Uncle-Master Feng? Or is it Great Master No Commandment? Or even Tian Boguang? How about Elder Bamboo-Green? It doesn't seem to be any of them. Grand Uncle-Master Feng certainly has such respectful reputation and prestige, but he is living a secluded life and didn't even allow me to let out his whereabouts? How could he have left Mount Huashan for this?"

"Young Master, what you are asking here, brother Old and I most definitely dare not to answer. Even if you kill us, we wouldn't dare answer just the same. You already know the answer in your heart, why do you have to force us to spill it out?" Zu Qianqiu replied.

Hearing the firm tone in his voice, Linghu Chong knew that it would be of no use to try to force the answer out from him. So he said, "Fine. Your not answering my question is certainly not helping with venting my fury. Mister Old, you tied me up to a chair and scared the wits out of me. It's my turn to tie the two of you up this time. And maybe I still wouldn't be relieved and would want to cut out your hearts."

Old Man and Zu Qianqiu exchanged another stare and then answered in unison, "If you want to tie us up, we dare not resist in any way."

Old Man took out two chairs and a bunch of thick ropes. The two of them first tied their own feet to the legs of the chairs tightly and then placed their

hands behind their back. “Young Master Linghu, if you will,” they said, both thinking that Linghu Chong wasn’t really going to tie them up to vent his anger and most likely he was just joking. But to their great surprise, Linghu Chong actually picked up the rope and tied their hands behind their backs as tightly as he could before picking up Old Man’s knife.

“I can’t seal your acupoints with my finger because I lost all my inner energy. But I am afraid that you would try to get out of the ropes. That’s why I am gonna strike your acupoints with the knife handle to seal them that way,” Linghu Chong explained.

He turned the knife over and then struck the two with much strength at the Huan-Tiao, Tian-Zhu, and Shao-Hai Acupoints using the knife handle. It took him a while to finally seal the acupoints. Stunned, Old Man and Zu Qianqiu looked at each other in speechless despair, and soon felt tickles of fear growing into swarms of terror, not knowing what Linghu Chong had planned next.

“You wait here for me,” Linghu Chong exclaimed as he turned and walked out of the hall.

Holding the knife in his grip, Linghu Chong walked until he was outside of the girl’s bedroom. He cleared his throat and then asked.

“Miss Old…um…miss, how are you feeling?”

He had wanted to address her as “Miss Old,” but then he decided against that. Even though the girl’s family name was Old, in her young age, it wouldn’t sound very appropriate to call her “Miss Old,” and “Miss Old Not-Dead” would simply be unimaginably queer. The girl didn’t answer, and only let out a slight snort.

Linghu Chong lifted the cotton curtain and then entered the room. He could see her still in a sitting position, leaning against the pillows, her eyes slightly open, half awake and half asleep. Linghu Chong took two steps forward. Now he could see that her skin on her face almost looked like crystal. Blue veins could clearly be seen underneath the light yellowish muscles; it almost appeared as if he could see blood flowing slowly along the veins. It was so quiet in the

room. Everything was in a standing still, not even a trace of brisk wind, as if the blood inside her was also coagulating drop by drop, except her tender breathing, so weak that it seemed as if every time when she breathe out, that was one less breathe for her.

"This young girl could have survived if I didn't take her medicine pills by mistake. I don't have many days left anyway. It doesn't make much difference whether I live a few days more or a few days less, does it?" Linghu Chong thought.

He reached out and grabbed a china bowl. Placing it on the small bed table, he raised his left wrist and then sliced it open with the knife. Blood immediately gushed out like a spring and poured down into the china bowl. Noticing that the basin of hot water Old Man had prepared earlier was still letting out hot steams, he set the knife down and then splashed some hot water over the cut on the wrist so the blood wouldn't start clotting too soon. Within moments, blood had filled more than half of the bowl.

Even in the wooziness, the girl soon noticed the strong smell of blood and as soon as she opened her eyes, the sight of blood dripping all over from Linghu Chong's wrist terrified her. She let out a shriek in shock.

Seeing that the bowl was almost filled with blood, Linghu Chong walked next to the bed and then held the bowl right next to the girl's mouth.

"Hurry, drink this. There are panaceas in the blood that will be able to cure your decease," he urged gently.

"I…I…I am scared. I don't…want to drink that," the girl rejected.

After shedding a bowl worth of blood, Linghu Chong felt as if his head had become completely drained and his legs almost gave out under him.

"If she doesn't drink this because she is scared, wouldn't I have shed my blood for nothing?" he thought to himself.

Grabbing the knife into his left hand, he yelled, "If you don't do what I tell you, I'll kill you with this knife." Right after the last word, he placed the tip of

the blade next to the girl's throat.

The girl feared for her life and had to swallow down the entire bowl of blood. For several times she almost vomited from the nauseating, but every time when she caught the sight of the shinning blade in Linghu Chong's hand, the terror overwhelmed her and prevented her from throwing up.

Linghu Chong watched her drink up the entire bowl of blood. The wound on his wrist had slowly stopped bleeding as blood clots started forming around it.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "I took Old Man's 'Life-Extending Eight Pills,' but what went into the girl's stomach was perhaps even less than one tenth of it. Once I use the restroom a few times, I am afraid even more would be lost. I'd better feed her a few more bowls of blood while I still can, until I am too weak to move about." At that thought, he cut open his right wrist, also, and as soon as the bowl was filled with blood, he rushed to feed the girl again.

The girl frowned. "Don't…don't force me. I can't take anymore of this," she pleaded.

"It's not up to you. Hurry up! Drink! Hurry!" Linghu Chong urged.

The girl drank some more reluctantly and had to stop for a moment to catch her breath.

"Why…why are you doing this? Doing this is very harmful for your body," she said.

"It's quite alright. Don't worry about my body. It's all for your good." Linghu Chong let out a forced smile.

As soon as Branch Fairy and Fruit Fairy fell into the fishing net booby trap set by Old Man, they immediately tried to set themselves free, but the more they struggled, the tighter the fishing net became, and soon they couldn't even move their arms or legs any inch. Although the two of them couldn't move, that did not prevent their ears from functioning perfectly well and their tongues from arguing back and forth. At the time when Linghu Chong had tied Old and Zu to their chairs, Branch Fairy had predicted that he would certainly kill the two

while Fruit Fairy had predicted that he would definitely come out and set the two Fairy brothers free first. But that debate ended up a total waste of time. Neither of them had gotten it right. Linghu Chong had entered the girl's bedroom instead. Since the girl's bedroom was sealed very well with all the cotton sheets, only segments of Linghu Chong and the girl's conversation could be vaguely heard. For Branch Fairy, Fruit Fairy, Yue Buqun, Old Man, and Zu Qianqiu, even though all five of them had resourceful inner energy, they still couldn't tell what Linghu Chong was doing in the girl's bedroom, so they had to let their imagination run wild. When suddenly the girl's scream broke out, all their faces changed color.

"Linghu Chong is a guy. What is he doing in a girl's bedroom?" Branch Fairy asked.

"Listen, that girl was in terror," Fruit Fairy exclaimed. "She said, 'I…I am scared!' And Linghu Chong said, 'If you don't do what I tell you, I'll kill you with this knife.' He said 'do what I tell you.' What does he want the girl to do?"

"What else? Of course he is forcing the girl to be his woman." Branch Fairy concluded.

"Ha-ha, how funny! That short melon-size man's daughter of course has to be a short melon-size girl as well. Why would Linghu Chong want to force her to be his woman?" Fruit Fairy disagreed.

"Different people favor different things! Maybe Linghu Chong has this thingy for fat girls, and as soon as he spots a fat girl, he'd find himself in heaven and totally forget about everything else." Branch Fairy argued.

"Wow, did you hear that? The fat girl is begging him now. I think she said something like, 'Don't force me. I can't take it anymore.'" Fruit Fairy imitated.

"That's right. But the chap Linghu Chong is determined. He said, 'It's not up to you. Hurry up! Hurry!'" Branch Fairy followed.

"Why is Linghu Chong asking her to hurry up? Hurry up doing what?" Fruit Fairy asked.

“You never got married and are still a virgin, of course you don’t understand,” Branch Fairy mocked.

“Like you’ve ever married anyone, you shameless jerk!” Fruit Fairy fought back.

“You know that I never got married. Why did you ask me for?” Branch Fairy reproved.

“Hey, Old Man! Linghu Chong is forcing your daughter to be his woman. Are you just going to sit there and watch her die?” Fruit Fairy shouted out loud.

“Mind your own business,” Branch Fairy admonished. “How do you know that fat girl is going to die? Isn’t his daughter’s name ‘Old Not-Dead’? How can she die?”

Ever since Old Man and Zu Qianqiu were tied to their chairs and their acupoints sealed, they listened through everything, from Miss Old’s scream to the sound of her begging for mercy. Gazing at each other with blank dismay, they were totally out of ideas. They had suspected the same thing themselves, and the loud arguments from the Peach Valley’s two Fairies in the courtyard only confirmed their suspicion.

“Brother Old, we’ve got to stop this. Who would have expected Young Master Linghu to be such a lubricious man? I am afraid he is going to get into big trouble,” Zu Qianqiu said to Old Man.

“Alas, I wouldn’t have minded him deflowering Not-Dead the kid, but…but that would really be unfair for the other one.” Old Man heaved a sigh.

“Listen, listen to that,” Zu Qianqiu suggested. “Your daughter Not-Dead has grown quite some affection for him. She said, ‘Doing this is very harmful for your body.’ And did you hear how Linghu Chong responded?”

“He said, ‘It’s quite alright. Don’t worry about my body. It’s all for your good!’ God damn it! These two kids!” Old Man replied.

“Brother Old, congratulations, congratulations!” Zu Qianqiu burst into loud laughter.

“Congratulations my ass!” Old Man scolded angrily.

“What are you getting angry for? Congratulations for getting a wonderful son-in-law!” Zu Qianqiu grinned.

Old Man let out a loud shout and reproved with a yell, “Stop the nonsense! If this gets out, do you think we’d still be alive?” When he spoke these words, his voice was filled with utter fear.

“Right, right!” Zu Qianqiu replied. His voice also quavered.

Yue Buqun had been hiding on the tree outside of the wall and was even further from it. Although he initialized the “Divine Art of the Violet Twilight,” he was only able to hear fragments of the conversation. At first, when he heard Linghu Chong forcing the girl, he had wanted to rush inside to stop it, but then he changed his mind, thinking that all these people, Linghu Chong included, had been so secretive and unusual, who was it to say that they weren’t conspiring something. The best thing for him to do at the time would be to observe calmly and not act recklessly. So he simply listened on with his ‘Divine Art of the Violet Twilight’ fully loaded. Then the dialogues between the Peach Valley’s Two Fairies and the ones between Old and Zu kept ringing in his ears. He was also convinced that Linghu Chong must have taken advantage of the girl’s precarious condition and had molested the girl. Later when he heard the conversation between Old and Zu, he figured that since Linghu Chong was a dissolute and unconventional young man and the girl probably did carry her father’s genes and was a short and fat, ugly girl, it would only be natural for her to fall in love with Linghu Chong after losing her virginity to him. Seeing how ludicrous the episode has become, he couldn’t help but shake his head in despair.

The girl’s screaming voice rose again all of a sudden. “Don’t…don’t…too much blood. I beg of you….”

Suddenly, someone shouted from outside the walls, “Old Man, I’ve finally lost those Peach Valley’s Four Goblins.” Then came a gentle thud as the man leapt over the wall and entered the hall. It was none other than the man with the white banner who had provoked the Peach Valley’s Four Fairies into chasing him.

“What’s going on?” He was shocked to find Old Man and Zu Qianqiu both tied up to their chairs. He flipped his right hand swiftly and a shining dagger magically appeared in his palm. Waving his arms hurriedly a few times, he had cut lose the ropes around the two’s legs and arms.

The girl’s scream rose from her room once again, “Please…please…I beg you…no more.”

Picking up the urgency in her tone of voice, the man uttered a cry of shock, “It is Miss Old Not-Dead!” He dashed toward the door.

Grabbing the man by his arm quickly, Old Man yelled, “You can’t go in there!”

Stunned, the man put a halt to his steps. Then came the voice of Branch Fairy from the courtyard.

“I bet you the short melon must be thrilled to have a son-in-law like Linghu Chong.”

“Linghu Chong could die any day now. Why would he be so thrilled to have a half-dead half-alive son-in-law?” Fruit Fairy challenged.

“His daughter could die any day as well. They make a perfect half-dead half-alive couple,” Branch Fairy explained.

“Now, who will die and who will live?” Fruit Fairy asked.

“What a dumb question! Of course Linghu Chong will die. Miss Old Not-Dead’s name is Old Not-Dead. How can she ever die? Dummy!” Branch Fairy mocked.

“That’s not necessarily true. Does one’s name always reflect the reality? What if everybody in this world were named Old Not-Dead? Would every one of them grow old yet do not die? If that’s the case, then our training in martial arts would have been no good at all,” Fruit Fairy rebuffed.

Amid the arguing between the two brothers, a loud thud came from inside the room. Something had collapsed onto the floor. Miss Old screamed again, though her voice was weak, it was filled with panic.

“Dad, Dad! Come here, hurry!”

Old Man sprinted into the bedroom, only finding Linghu Chong lying on the floor unconscious, a china bowl leaning by his chest upside down and blood all over his upper body. Miss Old leaned by the bed. There was also blood by the corner of her mouth. Zu Qianqiu and the other man stood behind Old Man and stared at the bizarre scene, each with a stomach full of questions.

“Dad, he…he cut himself to draw blood, and then forced me to drink two bowls worth…he…he wants to cut himself more….” Miss Old exclaimed.

The shock struck Old Man like a thunder. He rushed forward and propped Linghu Chong’s upper body into his own arms. Now he could see the cuts on both of Linghu Chong’s wrists from which blood was still gushing out nonstop. Scared out of his wits, Old Man sprinted out of the room and returned with gauzes, bandages, and medication within moments. In the fluster, even though this was his own home, he still bumped his head on the doorframes, resulting in a big swelling on his forehead and a large hole on the wall.

When Branch Fairy heard the banging sound, he thought Old Man must have given Linghu Chong a good beating, so he shouted.

“Hey, Old Man, Linghu Chong is a good friend of the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies. Stop beating him. If you beat him to death, I promise you that the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies will tear all your fats into strips.”

“Wrong! Wrong!” Fruit Fairy reproved.

“What’s wrong?” Branch Fairy inquired.

“If he had muscles all around his body, then of course you can tear them into strips. But all he has are fats. You’ll end up with a bunch of grease. How can you tear fats into strips?” Fruit Fairy argued.

Old Man applied the medication to the wrist wounds and then wrapped the wounds well with bandages. After a good while of massaging the acupoints on Linghu Chong’s chest and stomach, Linghu Chong finally regained his consciousness.

Feeling slightly relieved and utterly grateful, Old Man muttered in a shaky voice, “Young Master Linghu, you…even by smashing us into bits and pieces wouldn’t have…alas…wouldn’t have….”

“Young Master Linghu, it was only because of a misunderstanding that Old Man tied you up earlier. Why did you take it so seriously? You are just making him feel even more embarrassed,” Zu Qianqiu said.

Linghu Chong let out a weak smile. “My internal injury cannot be cured by any catholicon. I truly appreciate the kindness of senior master Zu for feeding me the ‘Life-Extending Eight Pills’ that belonged to senior master Old. But it was really a waste…I hope this girl’s desease can be cured….” A strong feel of disorientation, caused by losing much blood, suddenly consumed him, and he passed out, once again.

Carrying Linghu Chong in his arms, Old Man walked out of his daughter’s bedroom and set Linghu Chong down on his own bed. “What now? What now?” he muttered distractedly with a long, worried face.

“Young Master Linghu lost a lot of blood. I am afraid he is on the edge of his life. What do you think if we three load all our inner energy and inject the inner energy into his body to revive him? What do you say?” Zu Qianqiu suggested.

“Naturally,” Old Man concurred.

He gently propped Linghu Chong up and placed his right palm on the Da-Zhui Acupoint at Linghu Chong’s back. As soon as he initialized his energy flow, his entire body suddenly shocked violently. A loud crack echoed as the chair he sat on collapsed to the floor and was smashed into bits and pieces.

Branch Fairy burst into loud laughter. “Guess how Linghu Chong inflicted his internal injury at the first place? It was all because our six brothers tried to heal him with our internal energy. Now the short melon decides to play the ape. Aren’t you just going to cause Linghu Chong new injuries on top of what he already has? Ha-ha! Ha-ha!”

“Hey, did you hear that loud cracking sound? That short melon must have been shocked by the inner energy inside Linghu Chong and smashed into

something. Linghu Chong's inner energy is actually our inner energy. The short melon, once again, is suffering from the wrath of the Peach Valley's Six Fairies! Wonderful! Wonderful!" Fruit Fairy added.

"Alas, if Young Master Linghu stays unconscious like this, I guess there's only one thing left for the Old Man. I'll just have to kill myself," Old Man heaved a heavy sigh.

The man came in last suddenly yelled out loudly, "Hi, the one on the jujube tree outside, are you Mr. Yue, the Head Master of the Huashan School?"

Yue Buqun was dumbfounded. "So he knew I was hiding here all along," he thought inwardly.

"Mr. Yue, you are a guest from afar. Why don't you come in for a visit?" the man shouted again.

Yue Buqun felt very awkward. It wouldn't be a good idea to go in, yet by now he could no longer stay on top of the jujube tree.

"Young Master Linghu, your apprentice, has fainted. Would you like to take a look at him?" the man urged again.

Clearing his throat to cover up the embarrassment, Yue Buqun leapt over the one dozen feet or so space in the courtyard and landed directly on the corridor under the eaves. By then Old Man had greeted out and cupped his hands to salute.

"Mr. Yue, come in please," he said.

"Forgive me for being an unexpected guest. I was just concerned about the safety of my apprentice," Yue Buqun replied.

"It was all my fault. Alas, if…if…" Old Man muttered.

"Don't you worry about it! Linghu Chong won't die," Branch Fairy suddenly cut in.

"How do you know that he won't die?" Old Man was overjoyed and asked hurriedly.

“He is much younger than you and also much younger than me, isn’t he?” Branch Fairy asked.

“Yeah, what about it?” Old Man was confused.

“Now do older people die first or do younger people die first? Of course it’s older people who will die first, duh! Since you are not dead and I am perfectly alive, how can Linghu Chong die?” Branch Fairy explained.

Old Man had hoped that he would probably have some unique ideas. Hearing the drivel from him, he could only let out a wry smile.

“I’ve got a real clever idea!” Fruit Fairy joined in. “Let’s all put our efforts together and change Linghu Chong’s name to ‘Linghu Not-Dead’….”

Yue Buqun followed Old Man and entered his bedroom, and then saw Linghu Chong lying on the bed, still unconscious.

“If I don’t make an exhibition of my ‘Divine Art of the Violet Twilight,’ these folks here would undoubtedly make light of our Huashan School,” he thought to himself.

He turned toward the bed, so when the violet color showed on his face no one would notice it, and secretly initialized his divine art. As soon as the divine art is loaded, he placed his palm on the Da-Zhui Acupoint on Linghu Chong’s back. Knowing how the energy streams swarmed inside Linghu Chong, he didn’t put much strength into his move, instead, only injected very little inner energy slowly. And as soon as he could feel the inner energy inside Linghu Chong started reacting to his maneuver, he pulled his palm back about half-an-inch from Linghu Chong’s skin and waited a short moment before placing his palm back onto Linghu Chong again.

A short while went by when Linghu Chong gradually gained his senses back and was able to speak, “Master, you…you are here.”

Seeing how Yue Buqun revived Linghu Chong without putting out much effort, the three observers made no effort to hide their admiration.

“This place is a hotbed of trouble,” thought Yue Buqun to himself, “better get

out of here soon. Besides, I wonder what's happening with my wife and the bunch of apprentices on the boat?" So he cupped his hand and said, "Thank you very much for your cordial reception to my apprentice and I. We'd better get going."

"Right, right! Young Master Linghu is not feeling well; we really should have been a better host. But he would probably be taken better care of with you. It is really a lack of manner on our side. We beg your pardon," Old Man apologized.

"You are being too modest," Yue Buqun replied.

Under the dim light in the room, he suddenly noticed the shining eyes of the third man, and a quick thought flashed by his mind.

"May I ask the respectful name of this friend?" cupping his hand in greet, he asked.

"I guess Mr. Yue has never met our 'Night Owl' Ji Wushi before," Zu Qianqiu grinned.

Yue Buqun felt a small chill in his heart as he pondered, "Night Owl Ji Wushi? I heard that this man was born with special abilities and has extraordinary eyesight. His conducts has always been uncertain, sometimes kind while sometimes wicked, sometimes good, yet at other times evil. Although his name is Ji Wushi, meaning out of one's wits, he is really a very tough one full of craft and cunning. Who would have expected him to be mingled up with the bunch such as Old Man?"

Cupping his hands hurriedly, he greeted, "I've heard your name many times and have long been looking forward to meet you. It's so fortunate that I finally got the chance today."

"Well, not just today. Aren't we going to meet again tomorrow on the Five-Tyrant Ridge?" Ji Wushi grinned.

Yue Buqun felt another chill in his heart. Even though he felt it wasn't the right manner to ask for more details after they had only met for a few minutes, his worries regarding his kidnapped daughter overwhelmed his concern for

proper protocols.

"I was wondering how I have offended fellow martial friends in the local area, somehow. I figured that it must have been my lack of manners for having not paid any visits to the various masters around here. Would Mr. Ji be kind enough to give me some pointers, as to which friends had invited my daughter and an apprentice named Lin over?"

"Really? I don't think I know much about that," Ji Wushi replied with another grin.

To ask Ji Wushi so nicely about the whereabouts of his daughter was already quite a concession for Yue Buqun – the Head Master of the renowned Huashan School. When Ji Wushi obviously had evaded the issue, though worried and irritated, Yue Buqun could not ask any further. So he put on an indifferent face and said dryly,

"I am sorry to have disturbed you so late at night. I'll see you around."

He propped Linghu Chong up and was just about to pick him up into his arms, when Old Man suddenly stuck his head out between the Master and the apprentice and rushed to hold Linghu Chong into his own arms.

"I am the one who took Young Master Linghu here, so naturally I am the one responsible for sending him back," he exclaimed as he grabbed a thin blanket to cover up Linghu Chong's body before striding out.

"Hey, hold it! What about us, the two big fish here?" Branch Fairy shouted in a hurry.

"Well…" Old Man hesitated. If he let the two brothers go, it would really be difficult to ward off the revenge from the Peach Valley's Six Fairies. But with these two as hostages, the other four would at least have some scruples.

Linghu Chong knew what Old Man had in his mind. "Senior master Old, will you please set the two of them free? Now you two Fairies, will you please not seek any revenge or cause any trouble for Master Old and Master Zu? How about turning adversity into friendship?" he suggested.

“With just the two of us, I don’t think we can make trouble for them even if we tried,” Branch Fairy replied.

“Of course I am referring to all six of the Peach Valley’s Fairies,” Linghu Chong clarified.

“To not seek revenge or make trouble for them is alright, but there’s no way we are going to turn adversity into friendship. Even if you chop my head off, there’s still no way,” Fruit Fairy exclaimed.

Old Man and Zu Qianqiu both grunted, thinking, “It is only for the sake of Young Master Linghu that we have agreed to not fuss about with you. Did you actually think the ‘Old Ancestor of the Yellow River’ is afraid of the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies?”

“Why’s that?” Linghu Chong asked.

“The Peach Valley’s Six Fairies never had any grudges against or any scores to settle with the Old Ancestor of the Yellow River. We are never adversaries, so there’s simply no way that we can turn ‘adversity’ to anything. That’s why becoming friends would be fine but there’s no way we can turn ‘adversity’ to ‘friendship’ no matter what,” Fruit Fairy elaborated.

At those words, everyone laughed out loud. Zu Qianqiu stooped down and untied the slipknot on the fishing net. The strings of the fishing net were made from human hair, silk from wild silkworms, and pure gold threads interweaved together, which then became extremely tenacious and persistent. Even sharp knives or swords couldn’t have been able to cut through them. If anyone got trapped inside it, the more he struggled, the tighter it became. Unless someone untied the slipknot from the outside, it would be impossible to get out of the trap.

As soon as Branch Fairy got back onto his feet, he dropped his pants and started pissing all over the fishing net.

“What…what are you doing?” Zu Qianqiu asked in shock.

“If I don’t piss all over this damn net, how am I going to vent my spleen?”

Branch Fairy answered.

The seven of them returned to the wharf. Yue Buqun could see from a distance that the two apprentices Lao Denuo and Gao Gemming had been guarding the boat with swords in their hands. Knowing that everyone was alright, he was slightly relieved.

Old Man carried Linghu Chong into the cabin and then bowed all the way down.

“Young Master Linghu, your virtue shines above the nine Heavens, I am utterly grateful for what you have done. I’ll say goodbye for now but we’ll meet again soon.”

Because of the bumps on the way back, Linghu Chong had fallen back into a state of wooziness and almost fainted again. He didn’t really catch Old Man’s words and only answered with a weak hum.

Noticing the completely opposite attitude shown by the meatball man before and after, how respectful and cautious he had become toward Linghu Chong, Madam Yue and the rest of the apprentices were dumbfounded. Afraid that Root Fairy and the bunch of Peach Valley Fairies might get back soon, Old Man and Zu Qianqiu didn’t want to stay any longer and soon bid their farewell to Yue Buqun.

“Wait, brother Zu.” Branch Fairy beckoned at Zu Qianqiu.

“What’s the matter?” Zu Qianqiu asked.

“This!” Branch Fairy answered as he bent his knees and suddenly rammed his shoulder toward Zu Qianqiu’s chest with full speed.

This completely caught Zu Qianqiu by surprise. Having no time to dodge away, Zu Qianqiu quickly loaded his inner energy. Within a split second, he had gathered resourceful inner energy in his lower stomach, which made his chest and stomach as hard as a rock. Dozens of cracking and smashing noises exploded all at once. A split second later, Branch Fairy had quickly withdrawn back dozens of feet, bursting into loud laughter.

“Oh no!” Zu Qianqiu uttered a cry as he reached into his chest pocket and took out countless of bits and pieces. Among those were chips of china, jade, bamboo, and wood. The over two dozens of precious wine cups in Zu Qianqiu’s chest pocket had all been smashed from the collision, even cups like the Golden Cup, Silver Cup, or the Bronze Jue had all been completely flattened out. Consumed by strong fury and deep regrets, Zu Qianqiu waved his hand and shot the scores of debris toward Branch Fairy like a swarm of darts, but Branch Fairy had expected that and swiftly dodged away.

“Linghu Chong told us to turn adversity into friendship. We must obey his orders. That’s why we must become adversaries first before becoming friends,” Branch Fairy shouted.

Having lost all the precious wine cups that took him decades to collect by Branch Fairy’s one single hit, Zu Qianqiu was infuriated. But hearing Branch Fairy’s words just when he was about to launch his full wave of attacks, he immediately pulled his steps back.

“That’s right. Turn adversaries into friends. Turn adversaries into friends,” he murmured with a wry smile and then walked away together with Old Man and Ji Wushi.

In his muddled mind state, Linghu Chong was still concerned about the safety of Yue Lingshan. “Branch Fairy, will you please ask them to not…not harm my apprentice sister Yue?” he said.

“Certainly!” Branch Fairy answered and then shouted out loudly, “Hey! Old Man, Night Owl, and Zu Qianqiu, listen up! Linghu Chong said that you should not harm his darling apprentice sister.”

Ji Wushi and the group of three had walked quite a distance away when they heard Branch Fairy. At the words they all stopped their steps. Old Man turned his head around and shouted his answer.

“If Young Master Linghu says so, we’ll certainly comply.”

After the three of them discussed this over some whispers, they resumed their steps.

Yue Buqun started telling Madam Yue what he saw and heard over at Old Man's house, but only a few sentences into it, loud shouts and noises from ashore interrupted him. Root Fairy and the rest of the three Fairies had returned.

The four of them certainly kept their mouths busy bragging continuously about how they had caught the man holding the white banner and how they had torn him into four pieces.

Fruit Fairy laughed so hard that he almost lost a few teeth. "Wow! Amazing!! Brothers, you guys are so awesome!" he mocked.

"Ha-ha, so you tore that man into four pieces. Did you know what his name was?" Branch Fairy asked.

"He's dead already. Who cares what his name was? Could you have known his name?" Trunk Fairy answered.

"Of course I do," Branch Fairy replied. "His name is Ji Wushi, and he also has a nick name called 'Night Owl'."

Leaf Fairy applauded. "Hey! What a wonderful name that was! Turned out this guy actually had some insights. He must have known beforehand that one day he would be caught by the Peach Valley's Six Fairies and would be totally out of his wits,[46] having no way of escaping the fate of being torn into four pieces, that's why he gave himself that name."

"That 'Night Owl' Ji Wushi was certainly a tough guy. His Kung Fu was so extraordinary! And totally exceptional too!" Fruit Fairy exclaimed.

"That's right, his Kung Fu was excellent," Root Fairy couldn't have agreed more. "If it weren't for his bad luck that he picked the Peach Valley's Six Fairies to mess with, his Kung Fu in Qing-Gong could have ranked him among the top fighters in the Martial World."

"His Kung Fu in Qing-Gong was nothing compared to this. Did you know that after you tore him into four pieces, he was able to put all the pieces back together and revive himself from death, and then walked around just like normal? He even came here just moments ago and had a nice chat with us."

Fruit Fairy cracked an evil grin.

By then did Root Fairy and the rest of the three Fairies finally realize that their lie had been uncovered, but neither of them had much concern about it, and all put on a pretended surprise on their faces.

"Wow, I had no idea that Ji Wushi knew such odd Kung Fu. That just proves the old saying that you cannot judge a person by his look like you cannot measure the ocean using a ladler. How admirable! Truly remarkable!" Flower Fairy exclaimed.

"I've heard that there's this Kung Fu called the 'Piece Parts Back into a Whole Art', which allows the practitioner to put the torn apart four pieces of himself back into a whole and allows him to walk normally within instants. But I thought this Kung Fu had been lost ages ago. Who would have expected that Ji Wushi somehow have mastered it? Hmm, he is indeed a unique one in the Martial World. Well, I suppose the next time when we see him, it's all right to befriend him," Trunk Fairy speculated.

Meanwhile, Yue Buqun and Madam Yue found themselves profoundly worried. Their beloved daughter had been kidnapped, yet they had not a clue in regard to whom the enemy might have been. The Huashan Sword School enjoyed great fame in the entire Martial World; they certainly didn't expect to suffer such a setback by the Yellow River. But they kept the feeling to themselves and showed no sign of it, afraid that it would create a panic among the many apprentices. The couple didn't discuss any of the doubts and suspicious they had accrued, either, only pondered upon them individually, and the only noises inside the cabin were nothing but the constant rubbish coming out of the Peach Valley's Six Fairies.

Over two hours went by uneventfully, and daybreak was almost around the corner. Suddenly the sound of footsteps from ashore broke the silence and moments later two sedans had arrived by the bank.

The leading sedan carrier announced in a loud and clear tone, "Young Master Linghu said that Miss Yue should not be harmed or frightened in any way. Our

superior has sent us to apologize for the accident and ask for Young Master Linghu's forgiveness."

The four carriers set down the two sedans, bowed toward the direction of the boat, and then turned around and walked away.

"Dad! Mom!" Yue Lingshan's voice shouted from inside one of the sedans.

Shocked but utterly overjoyed, the Yue couple leapt ashore and lifted the curtain of the sedan. Needless to say, it was Yue Lingshan sitting inside, only that the acupoints on her legs had been sealed, which prevented her from moving about. And not to their surprise, the occupant of the second sedan was none other than Lin Pingzhi.

Yue Buqun stroked the Huan-Tiao, Ji-Zhong, and Wei-Zhong Acupoints on his daughter's legs and opened the sealed acupoints for her.

"Who was that large-build man?" he asked.

"That tall and big giant, he…he…he…." Curling her cute lips, Yue Lingshan almost cried out.

Gently picking her up and holding her in her arms, Madam Yue walked back into the cabin. "Are you alright?" she asked in a whisper?

Hearing her mother's question, Yue Lingshan burst into a sob, which almost gave Madam Yue a heart attack.

"Those people weren't really law abiding citizens of the society. Lingshan was in their hands for quite some hours. Could she…could she have been disgraced?" Madam Yue's imagination started running wild. "What happened? It's alright, you can tell your mother," she asked hurriedly. But Yue Lingshan only cried louder.

Madam Yue started to panic, but she couldn't ask anything further with such a big crowd around. Setting her daughter down to a bed, she pulled a quilt and wrapped it around her.

"Mom, that big giant swore at me," Yue Lingshan suddenly cried out after some loud sniffs, and her words set Madam Yue's heart back into its chamber.

“Is that all? Are you just grieving over some badmouthing?” Madam Yue asked with a smile.

“He also raised his hand to scare me, pretending that he was going to hit me,” Yue Lingshan exclaimed as she cried on.

“Alright, alright! When we see him next time, we’ll cuss him back and scare him back,” Madam Yue comforted her with a grin.

“I never badmouthed big apprentice brother, neither did Little Lin. That big giant was so vicious and overbearing. He said that what he doesn’t like the most was for people to badmouth Linghu Chong. I said I don’t like that either. Then he said that if he doesn’t like someone, he’d simply cook him and eat him. Mom, at that word, he opened his mouth to scare me with his ghastly teeth,” Yue Lingshan whimpered.

“That was evil,” Madam Yue replied. “Chong, who is that giant man?”

“The giant man? I…I….” Still quite muddleheaded, Linghu Chong murmured back.

By then, Lin Pingzhi’s sealed acupoints were also opened by his Master and he had walked in the cabin.

“Master-Wife, that giant man and the monk really do eat human flesh. They weren’t just trying to sound scary,” he intercepted.

“The two of them do eat human flesh? How did you know?” Madam Yue was stunned.

“The monk asked me about the Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript for a while and then took out something from his chest pocket and started chewing on it with full interest. He even stuck that thing under my nose and asked me if I wanted to take a bite just for the taste of it. Turned out…turned out that thing was the hand of a human.”

“Why didn’t you mention any of that to me earlier?” Yue Lingshan uttered a cry of shock.

“I was afraid you would be frightened, so I kept that to myself,” Lin Pingzhi

answered.

"Ah, I remember now," Yue Buqun suddenly spoke out. "Those two are the 'Bear Duo of the Northern Desert.' The giant man's skin is almost completely white while the monk's skin is very dark, isn't it?"

"That's right! Dad, you know them?" Yue Lingshan asked.

"No, I don't. I just heard before that there are two notorious robbers in the northern desert region. One is called the White Bear, and the other one the Black Bear. If merchants travel by themselves, these 'Bear Duo' merely rob them of their goods, but if the goods were transferred by martial escorts, then the 'Bear Duo' often cooks the escorts up and eats them. They say that since martial people have stronger muscles, they are normally extra chewy," Yue Buqun elaborated.

"Ah!" Yue Lingshan let out another cry of terror.

"Senior apprentice brother! Why did you have to bring that up? 'Extra chewy,' that's so gross," Madam Yue protested.

Yue Buqun let out a slight grin. After a short pause, he continued, "I heard that the 'Bear Duo of the Northern Desert' never came to this side of the Great Wall. Why did they come by the Yellow River this time? Chong, how did you know the 'Bear Duo of the Northern Desert'?"

"Bare Dew of the Northern Desert?" Linghu Chong murmured. He didn't really pick up the first half of his Master's words, and thought his Master had said "Bare Dew" or something like that. "I don't know him," he answered after a short daze.

"Little Lin," Yue Lingshan suddenly intercepted, "when that monk asked you to take a bite at the hand, did you do it?"

"Of course not," Lin Pingzhi answered immediately.

"You'd better not. If you did, humph, I'll never talk to you again," Yue Lingshan exclaimed.

Trunk Fairy suddenly interrupted from the outer cabin, "Human flesh is the

most ambrosial relish in the entire world. I bet you that Little Lin must have sneaked a bite and just wouldn't admit it, that's all."

"If he really didn't sneak a bite, why didn't he say it at the very beginning? Why bend over backward and deny so frantically now?" Leaf Fairy added.

Ever since Lin Pingzhi's terrible family tragedy, he had always been watching out for his own words and behavior. The two Fairies' censure took him by surprise and he found himself speechless.

"There you go. See, his not answering clearly shows his acquiescence. Miss Yue, he ate human flesh and still wouldn't admit it. How can you marry someone so dishonest?" Flower Fairy joined in.

"After you marry him, undoubtedly he would court other women behind your back. And when you ask him about it when he gets home, I bet you he would deny everything all the same," Root Fairy predicted.

"And there's one more thing, a very dangerous thing I must add. Once he gets totally addicted to human flesh, when he sleeps with you on the same bed, in the middle of the night, suddenly you wake up from the terrible pain coming from you fingers, while you ears are filled with the constant cracking sound form somebody chewing on something. Then after you investigate further, guess what it is? It was Little Lin chewing on your fingers," Flower Fairy added.

"Miss Yue, even when we include your toes, you've only gotten twenty digits all together. Now when your Little Lin chews a few today and a few tomorrow, your ten fingers and ten toes won't last very long at all," Leaf Fairy said.

The Peach Valley's Six Fairies had considered Linghu Chong a good friend ever since they first met him on top of the Mount Huashan. Although the six brothers always get tangled up in silly arguments, they certainly weren't stupid, and had long noticed what had been happening between Linghu Chong and Yue Lingshan, like how the waterside flower pined for love from the brook by sending the many shed petals, while the heartless brook simply babbles on unrequited love. So when they had finally caught the flaw in Lin Pingzhi's words, they spared no efforts driving a wedge between Yue and Lin.

“You are just talking rubbish. I am not listening! I am not listening to any of it!” covering her ears with her hands, Yue Lingshan shouted.

“Miss Yue, it’s quite alright if you really want to marry that Little Lin, but if so, there’s this one special Kung Fu you’ve got to learn. This Kung Fu is going to be so important for you that if you miss the chance of learning it, I bet you that you are going to regret it for the rest of your life,” Root Fairy claimed.

“What Kung Fu is that? Why is it so important for me?” Noticing the sincerity in Root Fairy’s voice, Yue Lingshan simply couldn’t resist her curiosity but ask.

“That ‘Night Owl’ Ji Wushi has this Kung Fu called ‘Piece Parts Back into a Whole Art’,” Root Fairy exclaimed. “Now when Little Lin eats all your ears, nose, fingers, and toes in the future, you don’t have to worry no more. You can simply cut his stomach open and take those pieces out to put back onto your body, piecing parts back into a whole.”

Chapter 16: Gaining Blood

Translated by Lanny Lin



A girl leaped out from the cabin of the small boat and stood on the bow smiling. She was dressed in a blue skirt with white flower patterns. Outside the skirt, she had an embroidered apron with many colorful and shinning decorations. By the way she dressed, one can easily tell she was a minority girl.

Amid the much drivel from the Peach Valley's Six Fairies, the boat set sail toward the lower reaches of the Yellow River. It was almost the crack of dawn.

Clouds of morning mist hovered above the billowing waves, extending infinitely into the far distance, free from inhibition, and creating a magnificent view for the passengers aboard the boat.

Gradually, the morning sun rose above the horizon, casting a golden shine on the boat while reflecting in the river below, creating glistening reflections in the shapes of thousands of snakes. A small boat in the distance hoisted its sail and traveled toward them head-on. Catching the easterly wind, full force, with the cyan sail, the small boat moved swiftly up the stream. The giant picture of a white foot was painted in the middle of the cyan sail. And after the small boat had come closer so that everyone could take a good glimpse at the picture, they all concluded that it was obviously the picture of a female's foot, judging from the fine shape and delicacy it had presented.

"Why would someone paint a foot on the sail? How bizarre?" the Huashan apprentices muttered among themselves.

"This boat most likely belongs to the Bear Duo of the Northern Desert," Branch Fairy announced. "Oops, Madam Yue, Miss Yue, you girls had better watch out! It couldn't have been any clearer – those guys on that boat are fond of eating girl's feet!"

Yue Lingshan spat at him in disgust, yet a slight panic had already started swelling inside her.

Minutes later, the small boat was well within sight, and the passengers on the big boat soon noticed the faint singing coming out of the small boat's cabin. The sound was gentle and soft, and the lyric was peculiar – no one could understand a word of it, while the tonality was so utterly intimate that it didn't sound like singing but rather moaning or groaning. And then, it changed, now more like the sound of a love ritual, ardent and lascivious to the extreme. The many young apprentices of the Huashan School all blushed with embarrassment as Madam Yue grunted in disgust, "What kind of monster is this?"

Suddenly, a girl's sweet voice floated out from inside the small boat, "Is Young Master Linghu of the Huashan Sword School aboard your boat?"

“Chong, pay no attention to her!” Madam Yue whispered.

“We’d really like to have a good look at Young Master Linghu if that’s alright,” the girl asked again, her voice so charming and agreeable as though it had carried some kind of magical power that could sway one’s heart.

While the words still echoed in everyone’s ears, a girl had leapt out from the small boat’s cabin and stood on the bow of the boat, smiling. She was dressed in a blue skirt with white flower patterns. Outside the skirt, an embroidered apron with many colorful and shining decorations hung from her chest all the way to her knees, looking splendid in green and gold. The girl appeared to be around twenty-seven or twenty-eight years of age. Her skin had a slightly yellowish tone, and her two eyes were much larger than average, the pupils pitch black. The pair of large gold earrings dangling from her ears was at least the size of a wine cup. The two ends of a multicolored waistband around her waist shot forward from the force of the wind, but she was actually standing there barefooted. Even though the girl had shown great charm, but after hearing her voice before actually seeing her look, it was only natural to think that the charming of her voice far exceeds the charming of her looks. The girl smiled at the passengers on the big boat. By the way she dressed, one can easily tell that she was a minority girl.[47]

The boat carrying members of the Huashan School was traveling downstream, and it seemed as if it would have collided with the small boat when the small boat suddenly turned around in a swift maneuver. And after lowering the sail, the small boat now started traveling downstream side by side with the big boat.

Yue Buqun suddenly remembered something. “Miss, are you a subordinate of Chief Blue from the Five-Sylph Sect in Yunnan?”[48] he asked.

“You do have some insights. But you’ve only gotten half of it right. I am from the Five-Sylph Sect, indeed. But I am not a subordinate of Chief Blue,” the girl giggled and then replied in a soft tone.

Taking a few steps forward until he was at the bow of the boat, Yue Buqun cupped his hands in greeting.

“My name is Yue Buqun. Miss, would you be kind enough to inform me your respectable surname and enlighten me with your purpose in a detoured visit and the advice you will favor me today?”

“I am a Miao[49] girl. I don’t understand all your fancy talking there. What did you say?” The girl grinned.

“Miss, what’s your family name?” Yue Buqun asked again.

“You already know my family name. Why do you still ask me?” The girl chortled.

“I asked because I don’t really know your family name,” Yue Buqun explained.

“You are a grown up man. See, you’ve even got long goatees. Obviously you know my family name. Why make a scene and deny it?” The girl let out a big grin.

These words sounded quite disrespectful. But she kept smiling a most innocent grin on her face; her voice did not carry any trace of hostility.

“Miss, you must be joking with me,” Yue Buqun replied.

“Now Head Master Yue, what’s your family name?” the girl asked with a bright smile.

“Miss, you already know that my family name is Yue. Why ask while you know the answer?” Yue Buqun said uncomfortably.

Madam Yue had enough of the kind of frivolous dialogue. “Don’t pay attention to her,” she whispered to her husband.

Yue Buqun put his left hand behind his back and shook it a few times, signaling Madam Yue to stay put.

“Why is Mr. Yue shaking his hand behind his back?” Root Fairy became excited. “Oh, I see. Madam Yue told him to not pay attention to that girl, but after seeing how pretty and coquettish the girl is, he just wouldn’t listen to his wife and would rest at nothing but to pay a lot of attention to her.”

“Did you say that I am pretty and coque…something? Thanks a lot!” the girl said, chuckling. “Your Han girls are certainly prettier than us Miao girls.” Apparently she didn’t know that the word “coquettish” was actually a derogatory term, and was very pleased to hear others praising about her beauty. Then she turned to Yue Buqun. “You already know my family name. Why do you ask while you know the answer then?”

“Hey, what’s gonna happen when Mr. Yue doesn’t listen to his wife?” Branch Fairy muttered.

“It’s not gonna be good! Mark my word!” Flower Fairy concluded with an evil grin.

“Isn’t Mr. Yue’s nick name the ‘Gentleman Sword’?” Trunk Fairy joined in. “So he is no gentleman after all. He already knew what her name is, and still asks for it, again and again, trying to make conversation. I think he just wants to keep talking with the girl.”

Yue Buqun was greatly embarrassed by the remarks from the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies. These six brothers never watched their mouths; Heaven knew what more garbage might come out from their holes. And what impression would that leave the many apprentices when they hear this? But knowing what kind of people the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies were, he simply couldn’t take it seriously. So he cupped his hands and spoke again.

“Will you please pass along my greetings to Chief Blue. Yue Buqun of the Huashan Sword School wishes Elder Blue good health.”

That apparently shocked the girl. She opened her eyes even wider and rolled her eyes in disbelief.

“Why…why are you calling me ‘Elder Blue’? Am I that old already?” she asked.

“Miss, you…you are the Chief Blue of the…Five-Sylph Sect?” It was Yue Buqun’s turn to be completely shocked this time. He had known that the Five-Sylph Sect was a very sinister and vicious sect, and had always been referred to as the “Five-Venom Sect” among fellow martial people behind the back. When

the sect was founded about a hundred years ago, it actually was named the "Five-Venom Sect," and the founder of the sect and the key members of the sect were all Miao minorities. Later when several Han members joined the sect, they were able to convey to the Miao members that "Five-Venom" was not such an elegant name and changed it to "Five-Sylph," instead. The "Five-Sylph Sect" specialized in using miasma, parasite, and venomous pests, and shared great fame with the "Hundred-Toxic Faction" – one leads the northern region and the other tops the southern region in their knowledge of poison. Among the many members of the Five-Sylph Sect, most were Miao minorities, and lacked the skills in scheming shown by their counterparts in the Hundred-Toxic Faction, but the way they use their poison were so eerie and creepy that they were simply unimaginable. The rumor in the Martial World said that when the Hundred-Toxic Faction had wanted to poison someone, even though it was impossible to guard against the attacks, after some careful investigation and deduction, one could still understand how the poison worked; on the other hand, when someone was poisoned by the Five-Sylph Sect, even if the executor explained it in details, it would still be totally unbelievable and unimaginable. The uniqueness and the eeriness simply could not be reasoned using normal logic.

"I am Blue Phoenix. Didn't you know that already?" the girl explained with a grin. "I told you that I am from the Five-Sylph Sect but not a subordinate of Chief Blue. Now other than Blue Phoenix, herself, who else would not be a subordinate of Blue Phoenix within the entire Five-Sylph Sect?" At that word, the girl broke into loud giggles.

The Peach Valley's Six Fairies also broke out into loud laughter. "Mr. Yue is so slow. She pretty much told him, yet he keeps nagging away."

The only thing Yue Buqun had known about the Five-Sylph Sect Chief was the last name Blue. Now after hearing what the girl had just said, he realized that the chief's full name was Blue Phoenix. And the girl's colorful and pattern-rich dress did make her look like a phoenix. At the time it was tradition for Han families to keep a girl's maiden name secret. The maiden name would only be revealed the day when the prospect in-laws family proposed an engagement

with gifts and performed the “Maiden Name Revelation” ceremony. Even though martial families in the Martial World didn’t quite stick to that tradition to the letter, they still wouldn’t just give it out randomly. But this Miao girl revealed her maiden name out right so easily in front of a large crowd on the river, without showing any trace of bashfulness. Though her demeanor was natural and graceful, at the mentioning of her own name, the tone of her voice became even softer and sweeter.

“So it is Chief Blue, herself, who has come personally. It is certainly my lack of manners to have not greeted your gracious presence appropriately. May I ask what Chief Blue has to teach me about?” Yue Buqun cupped his hands together again to salute.

“I am completely illiterate. What can I teach you? Unless you mean you can teach me. See, the way you dressed does look like that of a schoolteacher. So you are thinking about teaching me to read, aren’t you? I am too thickheaded. You Han people are all too cunning. I doubt I’d be able to learn all that,” Blue Phoenix replied with a grin.

“Is she just acting dumb, or has she really no idea about standard polite greetings? Judging from the expression on her face, she doesn’t seem to be putting on an act,” Yue Buqun thought to himself. So he simply asked, “Chief Blue, why are you here?”

“Is Linghu Chong your apprentice brother or your apprentice?” Blue Phoenix asked.

“He is my apprentice,” Yue Buqun answered.

“Hmm, is it alright if I take a good look at him?” Blue Phoenix requested.

“But he is in poor health and a state of delirium at the moment, and would be unsuitable of coming out to pay his respects.” Yue Buqun wasn’t too fond of the idea.

“Pay his respects?” Blue Phoenix uttered in surprise, opening her big round eyes even wider. “I don’t need him to pay me respects. He is not a subordinate of my Five-Sylph Sect. Why would he need to pay me respects? Besides, he is

that one…hehe…that one's good friend. Even if he does want to pay me respects, I don't deserve it. I heard that he drew his own blood to feed Old Man's daughter in order to save her life. Such kind of passionate and affectionate man is the kind we Miao girls admire the most. That's why I've gotten to take a look at him."

"Well…well…!" Yue Buqun hesitated.

"I know he is badly wounded and have lost a lot of blood. You don't have to call him out. I'll come over myself," Blue Phoenix suggested.

"We dare not request your gracious presence," Yue Buqun said hurriedly.

"Whatever!" Blue Phoenix chortled, and with a gentle leap, she landed on the big boat carrying the Huashan school members.

Yue Buqun noticed the grace and ease she had displayed from the leap, yet nothing suggested that she had any extraordinary Kung Fu skills. Taking two steps back, he blocked the entrance to the cabin, feeling deeply troubled. He knew that the Five-Sylph Sect would make a very tough adversary, and when fighting with such unorthodox sects it would take a lot more than true Kung Fu skills to win the battle. That was the reason why he had been very polite toward Blue Phoenix from the very beginning. The two members of the Hundred-Toxic Faction had mentioned the previous night that someone had asked them to shadow the Huashan School. Birds of a feather flock together. Most likely it was the Five-Sylph Sect that had asked them to do so. Why would the Five-Sylph Sect be hard on the Huashan School? The Five-Sylph Sect was a large faction in the Martial World. When the chief of the sect came personally, logically he shouldn't have blocked the way, but to let a person with all kinds of eerie poisons all over her body into the cabin was the last thing Yue Buqun would want. Figuring that Linghu Chong coming out to meet Chief Blue probably would be the best solution for now, he held his position steadily and shouted out.

"Chong! Chief Blue wants to see you. Come out, hurry!"

"Yes, Master!" Linghu Chong answered feebly. But since he had just lost a lot

of blood recently, after hearing the calling from his Master, he couldn't even sit up and had to give up trying after failing a few pathetic attempts.

"I heard that he was seriously wounded. How could he come out?" Blue Phoenix objected. "It's very windy on the river. We don't want him to catch a cold on top of everything he is already suffering from, do we? I'll go inside to visit him."

Blue Phoenix started walking toward the entrance of the cabin. Only after a few steps, she was already within four feet from Yue Buqun and the strong scent of fragrance filled Yue Buqun's nostrils immediately. Turning slightly sideways, hesitantly, Yue Buqun spared enough room for Blue Phoenix to get through and watched cautiously as she entered the cabin.

The Peach Valley's Six Fairies occupied the majority of the outer cabin, five of them sitting down cross-legged while Fruit Fairy lying on the bed.

"You must be the Peach Valley's Six Fairies? I am the chief of the Five-Sylph Sect, and you are the Six Fairies of the Peach Valley. Sylphs are fairies, too. We are one of the same kind!" Blue Phoenix grinned joyously.

"Not likely! We are real and you are fake!" Root Fairy challenged mockingly.

"Even if you were real, we have six fairies, one more than what you have," Trunk Fairy added.

"It wouldn't be that hard to turn that around, you know," Blue Phoenix beamed.

"How are you going to having one more than us? Are you changing the name of your sect to Seven-Sylph Sect?" Leaf Fairy asked curiously.

"We only have five sylphs, not seven. But we can reduce the six fairies to only four fairies, then naturally we would have one more than you guys, wouldn't we?" A nasty grin flashed across Blue Phoenix's face as she spoke.

"Reduce the six fairies to only four fairies? Are you saying that you are killing two of us?" Flower Fairy bellowed in fury.

"Kill or not, that's all up to us, isn't it? But I heard that you are friends of

Linghu Chong, I guess we can let that pass. But you'll have to stop boasting yourself and claim that you have one more fairy than my Five-Sylph Sect," Blue Phoenix let out a triumphant smile.

"We love boasting ourselves. What'cha gonna do?" Trunk Fairy snapped.

All of a sudden, Root Fairy, Trunk Fairy, Leaf Fairy and Flower Fairy all leapt to their feet and each grabbed onto one of her limbs, but before they were able to lift her up, all four of them cried out and all let go of her simultaneously as though following an inaudible command, each holding out his palm and gazing at it in horror. Even Yue Buqun felt cold pricks all over his back when he took a quick glimpse of what the Fairies now had in their palms – two large emerald centipedes and two large spiders that had colorful stripes all over their bodies. The bodies of all four venomous pests were covered in long hairs, so disgusting that even a glance at them could make one sick. But the four venomous pests only moved slightly, and neither took a bite at the four Fairies. If they had bitten with their poisonous fangs, then the damage would have already been done, and they wouldn't have appeared as frightening. Just because they were now all alerted and provoked, and any slight movement could have prompt them to bite down with the poisonous fangs, the Peach Valley's Four Fairies dare not move an inch, and all froze right on the spot.

Blue Phoenix swung her arm conveniently, and the four venomous pests vanished all of a sudden. She must have put them away with the swing, but no one could tell where on her body did she store them. She paid no more attention to the Peach Valley's Six Fairies and walked further into the cabin. Having been frightened completely out of their wits, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies dared not speak another word.

Linghu Chong and the bunch of male apprentices of the Huashan School occupied the middle cabin. By then, Madam Yue and the many female apprentices had returned to the back cabin, and the clapboard between the middle cabin and the back cabin had been closed. After casting a casual glance at the many apprentices in the cabin, Blue Phoenix walked next to Linghu Chong's bed and called out gently.

“Young Master Linghu! Young Master Linghu!”

The gentleness and the affection carried in her voice seemed to have reached the extreme. As the sweet sound echoed in everyone’s ears, each felt a soul-stirring sensation surging through his entire body, and almost couldn’t help but answer, as if she had been calling him, not Linghu Chong. After these two calls, over half of the male apprentices found themselves red in the face and their bodies quivering slightly.

“Who…who are you?” Linghu Chong opened his eyes slowly and asked in a barely audible voice.

“I am a friend of your good friend, so I am your friend, too,” Blue Phoenix answered tenderly.

Linghu Chong acknowledged with a slight groan and then closed his eyes.

“Young Master Linghu, I know you’ve lost a great amount of blood. But don’t worry, you won’t die,” Blue Phoenix said. But in his daze, Linghu Chong didn’t reply.

Reaching under Linghu Chong’s quilt, Blue Phoenix pulled his hand out and started checking his pulse, but soon her eyebrows knitted into a straight line. Suddenly, she stuck her head out of the window, gave a whistle, and then jabbered out many words, which neither one inside the cabin could comprehend.

A short while later, four Miao girls entered the cabin. All of them were about eighteen years of age, and all dressed in blue skirts in white flower patterns, with an embroidered waistband around each waist. Each of them held in her hand an eight-inch long square box made of bamboo strips.

Yue Buqun frowned slightly, thinking that whatever the things in the Five-Sylph Sect members’ hands were, they could not have been anything good. Just Blue Phoenix, by herself, already had many centipedes and spiders hidden on her. Now, when these four Miao girls carried these boxes into the cabin openly, all hell would probably break loose. But since they showed no sign of enmity, it would be inappropriate of him to stop them.

Walking over by Blue Phoenix's side, the four Miao girls whispered something to her, and after getting a nod back, they opened the boxes. People in the cabin found their curiosity growing rapidly, all were eager to find out what kind of queer things might be stored in the boxes, except Yue Buqun, who was the only one who had seen the hairy venomous insects in Peach Valley's Four Fairies' palms, and only wished that he would never have to get a glimpse of the things inside the boxes. But suddenly, the strangest thing happened.

The four Miao girls rolled their sleeves high, exposing the snow-white arms, and then they also rolled their trouser legs high, until they were above their knees.[50] The many male apprentices of the Huashan School were stupefied as they gaped at the unusual sight, their hearts pounding madly.

"Oh, no!" Yue Buqun thought secretly. "These girls from this heretical sect want to perform some kind of evil enchantment and use lust to tempt my apprentices. Just the voice of that Blue Phoenix, alone, was already utterly lascivious, if she performed any kind of black art on top of that, having not enough self-control, the many apprentices would undoubtedly fall for it." He couldn't help clutching the handle of his sword, determined to put a stop to it if these members of the Five-Sylph Sect were to undress themselves and perform any witchcraft.

After the four Miao girls rolled up their sleeves and trouser legs, Blue Phoenix also rolled her trouser legs up unhurriedly. Yue Buqun winked at the many apprentices, signaling them to retreat out of the cabin, so as not to be perplexed by the evil enchantment, but only Lau Denuo and Shi Daizi followed his command. Among the rest apprentices, some walked a few steps hesitantly toward the outside before returning to the original spot, and some others simply froze there, lost in trance.

Yue Buqun gathered his inner energy around his lower abdomen and loaded his "Divine Art of Violet Twilight." Soon, a shade of violet color flashed across his face. He knew that the Five-Venom Sect had been entrenched in the southern region for over two hundred years, and their notoriety did not come by accident. Undoubtedly, they knew certain vicious and venomous sorcery. And when the

chief, herself, was performing the sorcery, it was no trivial matter. If he didn't guard his mind with the divine art, any slight oversight might have caused him to fall for her tricks. Seeing with his own eyes how these Miao girls exposed themselves in public, with no regard to dignity and having no sense of shame, Yue Buqun became more and more worried. To die of poison was one thing, but what he feared the most was to lose his clear conscience under the evil spell and bring shame to himself in the presence of everyone. If that ever happened, the reputation of the Huashan Sword School and the Gentleman Sword would have been completely ruined beyond redemption. He watched on as the four Miao girls each took something out of the box, something that wriggled back and forth in their hands. Just as he had expected, these had to be some kind of venomous worms. The four Miao girls placed these venomous worms on their exposed arms and legs, and as soon as the worms were set loose, they clung tightly to the skins.

Fixing his eyes on the worms, Yue Buqun soon realized that those weren't venomous worms, but rather blood-sucking leeches that were quite common in creeks or lakes of the countryside, except that these leeches were twice the size of a regular one. One after another, the Miao girls took out more and more leeches from the boxes. Blue Phoenix also took outs some leeches from one of the bamboo boxes, and placed them on her own arms and legs. In only a few moments, the five girls' arms and legs were completely covered by leeches; there were at least over two hundred of them in total. All the onlookers were dumbstruck, and neither had a clue as to what kind of strange scheme these five were up to.

Madam Yue had been in the back cabin, but after hearing the many cries of surprise uttered by the male apprentices in the middle cabin, she couldn't help pulling the clapboard open and taking a glimpse, herself, and as soon as her eyes met the bizarre scene, she also let out a cry of surprise.

"Don't be afraid. They won't bite you," Blue Phoenix comforted her with a smile. "Are you…are you Mr. Yue's woman? I heard that you have outstanding sword skills. Is that true?" she asked.

Madam Yue squeezed out a smile, but didn't answer. When Blue Phoenix had first asked if she were Mr. Yue's woman, it sounded very crude. And then, when she asked about whether Madam Yue's swords skills were truly outstanding, Madam Yue hesitated. If it had been someone else who had asked the same question, even if that person were hostile, she would have answered humbly. This Blue Phoenix evidently knew very little about conventions of Han Chinese; if Madam Yue had answered that yes, she did have outstanding sword skills, it would sound very arrogant; if she had answered that no, she didn't have outstanding sword skills, perhaps this Blue Phoenix would have believed it, and would look down upon her. With these thoughts in mind, she decided to simply reply with silence. Blue Phoenix didn't ask any further and simply stood there quietly.

In the meantime, Yue Buqun found himself on full alert. If the five Miao girls had any unusual action, he was ready to strike. To catch bandits first capture the ringleader. He would have taken Blue Phoenix down before anything else. By then, nobody in the cabin spoke another word; the only sounds were the heavy breathing from the many male apprentices of the Huashan School.

After a long while, the bodies of the many leeches on the five Miao girls' arms and legs started to puff up and soon turned into a faint reddish color. Yue Buqun knew that as soon as a leech touched the skin of a person or an animal, it would make a tight grip using its sucker disk, and then start sucking blood, not letting go until it was completely full. When the leech was sucking blood from someone, the person would, at most, feel only a slight itch or numbness. When farmers worked in the paddy fields, they would often have leeches clinging to their legs, sucking blood out of them without their notice.

"Why are these witches using leeches to suck their own blood?" he muttered to himself. "Perhaps in order to perform their enchantment, the Five-Sylph Sect members must use their own blood. It seems that the time when these leeches have sucked enough blood will be the time they execute their enchantment."

Blue Phoenix gently lifted up the quilt covering Linghu Chong's body. Pulling a leech that was about nine tenth full off her arm, she placed it on Linghu

Chong's neck next to an artery.

"Hey, what are you doing?" afraid that she might harm Linghu Chong in anyway, Madam Yue yelled hurriedly. Unsheathing her long sword, she leapt into the middle cabin.

"No hurry! Let's wait!" Yue Buqun shook his head.

Clutching her long sword tightly, Madam Yue gazed fixedly at Blue Phoenix and Linghu Chong. As soon as the leech was placed on Linghu Chong's neck, it bit onto his artery and started sucking again. Blue Phoenix took out a small china bottle from her chest pocket and unplugged the lid. Using the pointed fingernail of the little finger on her right hand, she picked a little bit of the white powdery substance from the bottle and then sprinkled some onto the leech's body. The other four Miao girls unbuttoned Linghu Chong's robe and also rolled his sleeves and trouser legs up, then they started taking the many leeches off themselves and planting them next to the many arteries on Linghu Chong's chest, stomach, arms and legs. Within a short moment, the over two hundred leeches had all been transferred onto Linghu Chong's body. Blue Phoenix kept on picking more of the white powder and sprinkling a little bit of it on each and every of the leeches. Then, something very strange happened.

While clinging to the five Miao girls, the more those leeches sucked, the more they puffed up, but now, they all started shrinking little by little. Yue Buqun suddenly understood. Feeling much relaxed, he exhaled a long breath.

"Turned out that they are just using the leeches as the medium to transfer their blood into Chong's arteries," he thought loud. "I wonder what are these white powders made of. How can they have made leeches give out blood? How miraculous!"

Having figured it out, he gradually relaxed the grip on the sword handle. Madam Yue also returned her sword to its sheath gently as a smile crept onto her once tightened face.

Even though the cabin was still swept with silence, it was far from the tension-filled atmosphere just a minute ago, when fierce battle could have been triggered

at any moment. And furthermore, even the Peach Valley's Six Fairies were utterly amazed by what they saw, their jaws dropping and their mouths wide open. Since all six mouths were wide open and could not close because of the dropped jaws, naturally, neither of them could make any remark about it nor argue about it. This had to be a very rare occurrence.

After another short while, a light clatter broke the silence as one of the leeches, which had spilled out all the blood in its stomach, fell onto the cabin floor, wriggled a few times, and then dropped dead. One of the Miao girls picked it up and threw it into the river through the cabin window. Soon, more and more leeches fell dead and were thrown into the river one after another. Within thirty minutes, all leeches had been thrown out of the window, and the once toast tan face of Linghu Chong now showed a slight redness of skin. The blood those over two hundred leeches had sucked and transferred into Linghu Chong's body amounted to about a bowl's worth. Even though it would not have made up for all the blood Linghu Chong had lost, it was enough to turn the corner for him.

Yue Buqun and Madam Yue exchanged a glance at each other, both thinking, "Being the Chief of a good-sized sect, this Miao girl didn't even hesitate to transfer her own blood into Chong's body. Since she had never met Chong before, she couldn't have fallen in love with him. She mentioned that she was a friend of Chong's good friend. When did Chong make friends with such an important and influential person?"

Blue Phoenix also noticed the improvement in Linghu Chong's complexion. After checking his pulses again and feeling that his pulses had become stronger, she was very pleased.

"Young Master Linghu, how do you feel?" she asked in a gentle voice.

Although Linghu Chong didn't quite understand everything, he, at least, had figured out that the girl was healing him, and also felt much improvement in spirit. "Thank you, Miss. I…I feel much better," he replied.

"Do I look very old? Am I too old already?" Blue Phoenix asked.

“Who said that you are old? Of course you are not! If it’s alright with you, I’ll make bold to call you a younger sister,” Linghu Chong replied.

Blue Phoenix was overjoyed; her face split into a big smile as if a beautiful spring flower had just blossomed, which made it more delicate and charming.

“You are wonderful! No wonder! No wonder the one who didn’t care about any other man in this world cares about you so much. That’s why…alas…,” she said with a smile.

“If you really think I am that wonderful, why don’t you call me ‘big brother Linghu’?” Linghu Chong grinned.

“Big brother Linghu,” Blue Phoenix called out, as a slight blush shot up her face.

“My good sister! My wonderful sister!” Linghu Chong called out with a big smile.

Linghu Chong had always been the unconventional type, and never bothered about small matters, very different from Yue Buqun, who always posed as a “Gentleman.” As soon as he regained consciousness, he had already known that Blue Phoenix liked to hear others calling her young and beautiful. When she had asked him frankly, even though she was older than him, he still called her a “younger sister,” thinking that since she spared no effort at healing him, it would be totally justifiable for him to give some compliments to repay her kindness. Not surprisingly, Blue Phoenix’s face lit up at these words.

But Yue Buqun and Madam Yue couldn’t help frowning, both thinking, “Chong is so frivolous, and there is really no cure for that. Didn’t Ping One-Finger say that he only has one hundred days left for this life? Now it’s even less than one hundred days. It wouldn’t be exaggerating to say that one of his feet has already stepped into the coffin, yet only moments after he regained consciousness, he was already teasing such a lascivious woman with nonsense.”

“Big brother, do you want to eat something? Why don’t I get you some pastries?” Blue Phoenix asked, smiling brightly.

“I don’t feel like eating pastries. But some wine would be great,” Linghu Chong answered.

“That’s easy! We have the ‘Five Jewels Nectar Wine’ that we made ourselves. You can give that a try.”

Blue Phoenix jabbered out some words in the Miao dialect, and two of the Miao girls returned to the small boat, soon returning with eight bottles of wine. After uncorking one of the bottles, they poured the wine into a bowl, and instantly, the sweet scent of wine and blossom filled the entire cabin.

“My good sister, there’s something about your wine. The sweet scent of blossom is too strong. It completely overwhelmed the flavor of the wine itself. I guess this must have been the wine for women,” Linghu Chong said.

“The scent of blossom has to be very strong, otherwise, the wine will have this fishy smell of venomous snakes,” Blue Phoenix answered with a grin.

“The wine will have the fishy smell of venomous snakes?” Amazed, Linghu Chong asked.

“Certainly! This wine of mine is named the ‘Five Jewels Nectar Wine,’ then of course we need to use the ‘Five Jewels’.”

“What are the ‘Five Jewels’?”

“The ‘Five Jewels’ are five different kinds of treasures in our sect. Have a look.”

Setting up two empty bowls, Blue Phoenix turned the bottle upside down and poured the rest of the wine into the bowls. Clattering sounds rose as a few small objects fell into the bowl, and at the sight of them, several Huashan apprentices screeched in terror.

Blue Phoenix took the bowl of wine in front of Linghu Chong. The wine had a very light color, almost as clear as water from a natural spring in the mountains. Soaked in the wine were five tiny venomous pests: a green snake, a centipede, a spider, a scorpion, and a small toad.

This sight also gave Linghu Chong a good scare. “Why do you put…put these

venomous pests in your wine?" he asked.

"These are the Five Jewels. Don't call them venomous pests," Blue Phoenix let out a disgruntled snort. But soon she asked, "Big brother Linghu, are you brave enough to drink this?"

"Well, I am a bit afraid of these…Five Jewels." Linghu Chong confessed with a wry smile.

Raising the bowl of wine high, Blue Phoenix drank a big gulp of it. "We Miao people have this custom. When we invite a friend to drink wine and eat meat with us, if the friend refuses to drink or eat, then we don't treat him as a friend no more."

Taking the bowl from Blue Phoenix, Linghu Chong drank the entire bowl of wine in big gulps, swallowing the five venomous pests together with the wine down his throat. Although he had plenty of spunk, he dared not to chew on them.

Blue Phoenix was overjoyed. Embracing Linghu Chong's neck into her arms, she gave two kisses on his left cheek, leaving two red marks on his face from the lipsticks on her lips.

"That's my good brother!" She beamed.

Linghu Chong also let out a smile, and then his heart skipped a beat when he suddenly noticed the stern look on his Master's face from a glance with the corner of his eyes.

"Darn! That was audacious, running wild right in front of my Master and Master-Wife. Undoubtedly Master will give me a good scolding after this, and perhaps little apprentice sister will despise me even more," he muttered to himself.

Blue Phoenix opened another bottle and refilled the bowl with wine, pouring the five venomous pests into the bowl as well. Handing the bowl in front of Yue Buqun, she said with a grin, "Mr. Yue, have some wine! My treat!"

Yue Buqun had already felt sick just from looking at the many venomous pests

soaked in the wine. When he smelled the vague, indescribable fishiness covered by the strong scent of blossoms, he was seized with a sudden urge to vomit. Extending his left hand out, he pushed toward Blue Phoenix's hand that was holding the wine bowl, but unexpectedly, Blue Phoenix didn't draw her hands back. Seeing that his finger almost touched the back of her hand, Yue Buqun jerked his hand back.

"How come the Apprentice is even braver than the Master?" Blue Phoenix grinned. "Friends of the Huashan School, which one of you would like to drink up this bowl of wine? It will be of great benefit to you if you drink this."

She held the bowl high with a hand. But there was only complete silence on the entire boat. There was no response.

Blue Phoenix heaved a long sigh. "I guess other than Linghu Chong, the Huashan School has not another true hero."

"I'll drink it!" a man suddenly shouted out. It was Lin Pingzhi, who stepped forward and reached out for the wine bowl.

Blue Phoenix expanded her eyebrows with a smile. "Well, turned out…."

"Little Lin," Yue Buqun suddenly yelled out. "If you eat those dirty things, even if you survive the poison, don't expect me to ever talk to you again."

"Go ahead, drink it up!" Blue Phoenix handed the bowl in front of Lin Pingzhi.

"I…I am not drinking it," Lin Pingzhi replied haltingly. Then hearing the loud laughter from Blue Phoenix, he went scarlet in the face. "It's not…it's not because I am afraid of death that I am not drinking the wine," he mumbled.

"I know! You are only afraid that this pretty girl will stop seeing you. You are not a coward. You are an affectionate lover. Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" Blue Phoenix laughed out loud. Walking next to Linghu Chong, she said, "Big brother, I'll see you around."

She set down the bowl on the table and then waved. Getting the command, the four Miao girls collected the rest six bottles of wine, followed her out of the

cabin, and then leapt back onto the small boat. Once again, sweet and intimate singing rose and floated above the water. Following the flow of the tide, the small boat soon gained speed and went further and further. The sounds of the singing also fainted gradually and eventually died away.

"Throw all those bowls and bottles in the river," Yue Buqun ordered with a frown.

"Yes, Master!" Lin Pingzhi answered and walked next to the table. Just when his fingers barely touched the wine bottle, a strong fishy odor suddenly shot up his nostrils. His body gave a sudden shake, and he almost lost his footing and had to grab onto the side of the table for support.

"The wine bottles are poisonous," Yue Buqun realized at once and yelled out loudly. He swung his sleeve toward the table. The force from the swing sent all the bowls and bottles on the table flying through the window and falling into the river. Suddenly, he felt a strong feel of nausea coming from his chest, and only after gathering a good amount of inner energy, were he able to hold it back. Then he heard a loud cry, as Lin Pingzhi burst out vomiting. Only seconds later, cries after cries rose as more and more people joined Lin Pingzhi and started throwing up wildly, even the Peach Valley's Six Fairies and the sailors at the stern of the boat were no exceptions. After fighting the urge forcefully for half a day, Yue Buqun could no longer endure the sickness and also started vomiting, himself. The many people kept vomiting back and forth. Even after they have spat out all the food inside their stomachs, the retching feeling did not go away, and they started vomiting up gastric juice, instead. And then after there was no more gastric juice left for them to spit out, the itching at their throats and the retching feeling inside their stomachs still remained. Everyone felt as though it would have been much better if they had something inside their stomach, so they have something to spit out, compared to vomiting again and again with an empty stomach. Among the dozens of people aboard the boat, Linghu Chong was the only one who didn't throw up.

"Linghu Chong, that witch regards you with special respect. She must have fed you the antidote," Fruit Fairy said.

“I didn’t take an antidote. Could that bowl of poisonous wine have been the antidote?” Linghu Chong muttered.

“That has got to be it. That witch saw that you are a handsome lad and fell for you,” Root Fairy concluded.

“Nah! I don’t think it was because he’s a handsome lad. It was because he praised that witch, saying that she was young and beautiful and all that,” Branch Fairy disagreed.

“Well, he still had to be brave enough to drink up the poisonous wine, and swallow those five venomous bugs, hadn’t he?” Flower Fairy added.

“He is not throwing up. But how do you know that it wasn’t because he is even more seriously poisoned than the rest of us with those five venomous bugs inside his stomach?” Leaf Fairy speculated.

“Oh, no, that’s terrible!” Branch Fairy cried out. “When Linghu Chong drank the poisonous wine, we didn’t stop him, or even say anything about it. If he dies from the poison, what are we gonna do when Ping One-Finger finds out about it?”

“Ping One-Finger said he was going to die soon, anyway. What’s the big deal if he dies a few days earlier?” Root Fairy shrugged it off.

“It’s no big deal for Linghu Chong, but it will be a big deal for us,” Flower Fairy exclaimed.

“Don’t worry! We’ll just take it on the lam. That Ping One-Finger is a fatty with short legs. I am sure he won’t be able to keep up with us,” Fruit Fairy comforted him.

Even while vomiting left and right, the Peach Valley’s Six Fairies didn’t want to give up arguing.

Noticing that the sailor operating the rudder also kept vomiting non-stop and the boat had been shaking back and forth dangerously, Yue Buqun leapt to the back of the boat and steered the boat toward the south bank. He had resourceful of inner energy. After circulating his inner energy a few times, the retching

feeling in his chest gradually decreased. Slowly the boat pulled over by the bank. Yue Buqun jumped to the bow of the boat and threw the iron anchor down the river. The iron anchor was well over two hundred pounds, and would have taken two sailors to carry it. Seeing that Yue Buqun, who looked just like a gentle and feeble scholar, was able to not only pick the iron anchor up with just one hand, but also throw it dozens of feet away without sparing much effort, the boatmen were left breathless. But that didn't last very long, because they soon had to return to their miserable vomiting routine. Everybody went ashore one after another. Kneeling by the river, they drank a stomach full of water and then spit them out. After several cycles, the vomiting finally stopped.

The section of the bank where they had parked the boat was a desolate and out-of-the-way spot, but several miles east from where they were, rolls of houses and buildings glowed in the sunshine from the distance – it appeared to be a town.

"There is still residual poison on the boat; we can't use the boat any more. Let's go to that town first and then we'll figure something out," Yue Buqun suggested.

With Trunk Fairy carrying Linghu Chong on his back and Branch Fairy carrying Fruit Fairy on his back, the group walked toward the town in the distance. After they entered town, in the van of everybody else, Trunk Fairy and Branch Fairy walked into a restaurant. Setting Linghu Chong and Fruit Fairy down onto two benches, they shouted immediately.

"Waiter! Waiter! Bring us some wine, some dish, and some rice!"

In a casual glance, Linghu Chong suddenly noticed somebody, and his heart skipped a beat. A short Taoist Priest sat up straight in the middle of the dining hall – it was none other than the Head Master of Qingcheng, Yu Canghai.

The Head Master of Qingcheng apparently was in the middle of a tight encirclement. He sat by a small table, on top of which lay a wine kettle, a pair of chopsticks, three plates of light snacks, and a shiny long sword showing its naked blade.

Seven benches surrounded the small table, a person sitting on each of them. Among the seven people, some were men and some were women, but all faces looked vicious and cruel. Each of the benches also had weapons on top of it. The seven of them simply gazed at Yu Canghai, neither of them making any sound.

The Head Master of Qingcheng appeared to be well composed. When he raised his wine cup fir a sip with his left hand, the sleeves didn't show the slightest sign of quiver.

"This short priest must be very frightened in his heart," Root Fairy commented.

"Of course he is. It's seven against one. He doesn't have a chance to win," Branch Fairy added.

"If he isn't afraid, why is he holding the wine cup with his left hand, not his right hand? Certainly he wants to spare his right hand, in case he has to grab on to his sword real quickly," Trunk Fairy said.

At that comment, Yu Canghai let out a disgruntled snort, and then handed the wine cup from his left hand to his right hand.

"He heard second brother's words, but didn't even dare to look at second brother. I'd say he is afraid, indeed. I am not saying that he is afraid of second brother. He is afraid that if he gets distracted, the seven enemies would attack all at once, and he would end up being chopped into eight pieces," Flower Fairy speculated.

"This short priest is already so small, if he gets chopped into eight pieces, isn't he going to be even smaller?" Leaf Fairy chortled.

Although Linghu Chong bore a grudge against Yu Canghai, seeing that Yu was surrounded by tough enemies, he didn't want to take advantage of Yu's situation.

"Six Fairy Brothers, this Priest is the Head Master of Qingcheng," he said.

"Head Master of Qingcheng? Big deal! Is he a friend of yours?" Root Fairy

asked.

"I dare not make friends with his high social position. He is not my friend," Linghu Chong answered.

"Great! If he is not your friend, then we've gotten a good show going here!" Trunk Fairy grinned.

"Bring me some wine! Hurry up! I want to enjoy my wine while watching how the short priest will be chopped into nine pieces," Flower Fairy shouted, smacking the table in front of him loudly.

"Why nine pieces?" Leaf Fairy asked.

"Look at that mendicant monk over there. He is wielding two Tiger-Head Machetes, that's why he'll produce one more piece," Flower Fairy explained.

"That's not likely. Some of these people use a Wolf-Fanged Hammer and some others use a Golden Cane. How are they going to chop?" Leaf Fairy argued.

"Let's be quiet," Linghu Chong urged. "We are not helping either side. Let's not distract Master Yu, the Head Master of the Qingcheng Sword School."

The Peach Valley's Six Fairies stopped talking, and all stared at Yu Canghai with fixed eyes and big grins on their faces.

One by one, Linghu Chong surveyed at the seven people who surrounded Yu Canghai. The first one was a mendicant monk, his long hair well reaching his shoulder. A shining copper hoop on his head bound the long hair together, and a pair of crescent shaped Tiger-Head Machetes sat on the side of his table. Sitting at the next bench was a woman in her fifties. Her hair had patches of grey, and her face was covered by some kind of a grim complexion. She had a two-feet long short knife lying by her side. Next to her were a monk and a Taoist priest. A red frock, as red as blood, draped over the monk's shoulder, and an alms-bowl and a cymbal lay silently by his side. Both the alms-bowl and the cymbal were made of fine steel. The steel cymbal had very sharp edges – obviously it was a formidable weapon. The Taoist priest had a tall build. An octagonal Wolf-Fanged Hammer, which appeared to be very heavy, sat on his bench next to him.

On the bench to the right of the Taoist priest sat a middle-aged beggar with his legs stretched out, and two green snakes coiled around his head and his shoulders. Both of the snakes had triangular shaped heads; their long tongues shot in and out viciously. The last two were a man and a woman. The man had a blind left eye while the woman had a blind right eye. Each had a cane leaning against his or her bench. The bodies of the two canes were extra thick and shined with a glistening golden color. If they were truly made of gold, the weight would have been extraordinary. Both the man and the woman were in their forties, and looked just like any down-hearted wanderers in the Martial World, yet they carried with them such expensive canes, making an unspeakably eerie scene.

The mendicant monk fixed his eyes at Yu Canghai with ferocious stares, and slowly he reached out with both hands and grabbed onto the handles of the two machetes. The beggar took off the snake around his neck and then coiled it on his right arm, aiming the head of the snake at Yu Canghai. The other monk picked up his steel cymbal, the Taoist priest lifted his Wolf-Fanged Hammer, and the middle-aged woman also placed the short knife in her grip. Obviously, they were ready to launch a synchronized attack.

"Winning by numbers, isn't that the old trick of you heretical, evil demons? Bring it on! Yu Canghai is not afraid of you." Yu Canghai let out a hollow laugh.

"Yu Canghai, we don't want to kill you," the one-eyed man suddenly spoke.

"That's right. As long as you behave yourself and hand over the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,' we'll let you leave with no troubles," the one-eyed woman exclaimed.

Yue Buqun, Linghu Chong, Lin Pingzhi, and Yue Lingshan were all taken by big surprise when they heard the woman mentioning the "Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript," neither had expected that the reason these seven people had surrounded Yu Canghai was actually for the sake of the "Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript." They exchanged a few stares among themselves; all had the same thought in their minds: "Could this 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' really be in Yu Canghai's hands?"

“Why wasting time with this dwarf? Let’s whack him first and then search his body,” the middle-aged woman said in a chilling tone.

“Maybe he hid it in a secret spot. If we can’t find it on him after we whack him, wouldn’t that be too bad?” the one-eyed woman said.

“If we can’t find it, we can’t find it. It’s not going to be any worse.” The middle-aged woman curled her lips. She spoke in such an indistinct manner, turned out that more than half of her teeth were already gone.

“Yu Canghai, if you listen to my advice, you’d better give it up. This sword art manuscript is not yours to start with, anyway. You’ve already had it for so many days. I am sure you’ve read it so many times that you probably have memorized everything. Why still hold on to it so tight? What good does it do for you?” the one-eyed woman persuaded.

But Yu Canghai did not say a word, only gathering his inner energy around his lower stomach, absorbed in the pre-battle preparation.

Right at that moment, sounds of laughter floated in from outside as a man with all smiles walked in the door. The man was dressed in a long pongee robe. The top of his head was already half bald, but the beard under his chin did not have a sprinkle of grey. His clothes looking costly and luxurious, his face glowing with health, the man looked like a merchant prince. Holding an emerald snuff bottle in his left hand and a one-foot long folding fan in his right hand, the chubby man had an affable expression on his face.
After spotting the many people upon entering the restaurant, he was taken by surprise, and his smiles shrank back a little, but only seconds later, he was all smiles, once again.

“How fortunate! How fortunate! I had not expected that all the heroes of the present time have gathered here today. I must consider myself very fortunate, indeed!” he cupped his hands in greeting, his face beaming. “Now, which good breeze has brought the Master Yu of the Qingcheng Sword School here to the Henan Province?” he said to Yu Canghai. “I’ve long heard that the ‘Pine-Wind Sword Art’ of the Qingcheng Sword School is a unique and superb Kung Fu

style of the Martial World. It looks like we are finally going to have the chance to broaden our horizons today."

But Yu Canghai still focused on loading his inner energy and paid no attention to him.

Turning toward the one-eyed man and the one-eyed woman, the man cupped his hands with a big grin. "I have not seen the 'Tung Cypress Whiz Duo' wandering about the Martial World for a good while. Looks like you've made a good fortune in the last few years."

"You flatter us. It's nothing compare to what Mr. You makes," the one-eyed man answered with a slight smile.

The man uttered three laughs at those words. "I've only gotten a facade. Whatever I earn with one hand, I spend with the other. Just from my nickname, people can tell that I only look good on the surface, but very hollow inside."

"What is your nickname?" Branch Fairy couldn't help but ask.

The man cast a glance toward Branch Fairy and soon found six strange looking fellows all staring at him curiously, but he had no clue as to who these six were and where they had come from.

"I have a very ugly nickname called 'Slippery and Hard to Grip'," he chortled as he spoke. "People say that I love to make friends, and for the sake of friendship, I never stint money and have no problem spending them. Hence, although I make good money, they don't stay in my hands long, because I don't have a good grip of them."

"Doesn't this friend You Xun, here, have another nickname?" the one-eyed man cut in.

"Really? How come I've never heard of it?" You Xun grinned.

"Loach Soaked in Oil, Slippery and Hard to Grip!" a cold voice suddenly spoke. The voice sounded indistinct, then, of course, it was the voice of the woman, who had lost over half of her teeth.

"Holy cow!" Flower Fairy yelled out. "A loach, itself, is extremely slippery,

already. Now when it's soaked in oil, who can ever get a good grip onto that?"

"That's only because friends in the Martial World were flattering me, praising about my Qing-Gong skills, saying that I am as quick as a loach. But it is really embarrassing. This little Kung Fu of mine is really not worth mentioning. Madam Zhang, you are looking extremely good these days!" You Xun beamed at the woman and then bowed down deeply.

"What a glib tongue you have there. Stay away from me," the old woman Madam Zhang turned the whites of eye up and yelled.

The man named You Xun must have had a very good temper. Hearing those harsh words, he didn't show a slight sign of annoyance, and turned to the beggar, instead.

"Double-Dragon Divine Beggar, brother Yan! The two green dragons of yours are looking even more vigorous and nimble now."

The beggar's name was Yan Sanxing, and his nickname was actually "Double-Snake Ruthless Beggar," but You Xun changed it into "Double-Dragon Divine Beggar" on the fly. Even though the Yan Sanxing was a very vicious and ruthless man, he couldn't help but smile at those words.

You Xun also knew the longhaired mendicant monk Chou Songnian, monk Xi Bao, and Taoist Priest Yu Ling, and also said some praising words to each of them. While laughing and joking, he had eased up the tense atmosphere at swords' points in the short amount of time.

"Hey, Loach Soaked in Oil! Why didn't you say anything about us, praising the six brothers of us for our excellent Kung Fu and outstanding skills?" Leaf Fairy suddenly yelled out.

"That's…that's of course something I'd praise about…," You Xun replied with a smile. But before he even had a chance to finish his sentence, all of a sudden, his two wrists and two ankles were already in the grips of Root Fairy, Trunk Fairy, Branch Fairy, and Leaf Fairy the four fairies, who immediately lifted him off the ground without pulling hard.

“What wonderful Kung Fu! What brilliant skills! Such superb techniques are so rare through out the ages!” You Xun praised hurriedly.

“Why are our Kung Fu skills so rare through out the ages?” Root Fairy and Branch Fairy asked at the same time.

“My nick name is ‘Slippery and Hard to Grip.’ Frankly speaking, no one could have gotten a tight grip on me. But as soon as the four of you reached out with your hands, you caught me with such ease, and I became neither slippery, nor hard to grip. The Kung Fu skills you have demonstrated with are so exceptional that through out the ages, no one had every seen or hear about Kung Fu skills this great. When I wander about the world after today, I simply have to publicize the six great Kung Fu masters’ names wherever I go, so that everyone in the Martial World would know that there are such extraordinary heroes in this world.” You Xun explained.

The six Fairies were overjoyed. Wasting not another second, they immediately set him down to the ground.

“Slippery and Hard to Grip! You certainly deserve the reputation. See, didn’t you just get out of the grip once again?” Madam Zhang said coldly.

“That’s only because the six great Kung Fu masters had exceptional Kung Fu skills. I admire them so very much!” You Xun answered. “But I am so ignorant. I don’t even know what the names of the six senior masters are. May I ask what your respectful names are?”

“We are six brothers called ‘The Peach Valley’s Six Fairies’,” Root Fairy explained. “I am Root Fairy. He is Trunk Fairy.” Soon, he had introduced the names of all six of them.

“That’s wonderful! Wonderful! The name ‘Fairy’ is so appropriate to go with the Kung Fu skills of the six of you. Only people with such magical and exceptional Kung Fu skills, which have risen above this world and attained sainthood, are qualified to use the name ‘Fairy’.” You Xun applauded.

The Peach Valley’s Six Fairies felt great rejoicing. “You are very smart and have very good insight. You are awesome!” they exclaimed in unison.

“Are you going to hand out the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ or not?” Glaring at Yu Canghai, Madam Zhang yelled. But Yu Canghai ignored her yet again.

“Oh, I see. So your dispute is over the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.’ But from what I heard, the sword art manuscript isn’t in Master Yu’s possession,” You Xun said.

“Are you saying that you know who has it?” Madam Zhang asked.

“This person is very, very famous. If I speak his name out, I am afraid it will scare the wits out of you,” You Xun exclaimed.

“Speak up!” the mendicant monk Chou Songnian yelled at him. “If you don’t know the answer, then begone, and stop being a hindrance!”

“This great master must have had a bit too much of roasted pork or roasted lamp, and the extra internal heat is fuming the hot temper. My Kung Fu skills are very ordinary, but I certainly have very quick access to information. Whenever there are secret messages floating around the Martial World, it wouldn’t be easy for them to get pass my eyes and ears without my noticing,” You Xun replied, still beaming.

The Tung Cypress Whiz Duo, Madam Zhang, and the rest of the group all knew that You Xun was speaking the truth. This You Xun loved poking his nose into other people’s affairs, and would spare no effort at making his way into every nook and corners for information. There weren’t really much that he wouldn’t know about in the Martial World. So they asked in unison, “Don’t keep us guessing! Who on earth has the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?”

“Well, you all know my nick name – ‘Slippery and Hard to Grip.’ Whatever I earn with one hand, I spend with the other. To be frank with you, I have been completely broke for quite some days. But you, on the other hand, are all loaded moneybags. Now, it wasn’t easy for me to obtain this important information, and it looks like this is going to be a great opportunity for me. The old saying said it well: a sharp blade should be presented to a true man, and beautiful rouge should be given to a pretty woman. So important information, of course, should

be sold to moneybags. I am not keeping you guessing. I am just waiting for the right offer."

"Fine. Let's kill Yu Canghai first, and worry about forcing the secret out of this loach later. Attack!" Madam Zhang shouted. As soon as the word "attack" was spoken, sounds of weapons rapidly colliding with each other echoed. The seven attackers had all left their benches and each exchanged a few moves with Yu Canghai. The attack stopped just as abruptly as how it had started. Within seconds, the seven attackers had retreated back to their original positions, still encircling Yu Canghai in the middle. Blood gushed out from the cuts on monk Xi Bao and monk Chou Songnian's thighs. Yu Canghai had handed the sword to his left hand; the part of his robe near the right shoulder had been torn into pieces – the result of a heavy strike from one of the attackers.

"Again!" Madam Zhang shouted out, and the seven of them lunged forward all at once. Some more rapid clanking sounds exploded before the seven retreated back, once again, leaving Yu Canghai in the middle.

This time Madam Zhang took a hit on her face. A long cut dragged from the middle of her left eyebrow all the way down to her lower jaw. Yu Canghai also took a chop on his left arm. No longer able to wield the sword with his left hand, he handed the sword back to his right hand.

"Master Yu, we are both members of the Taoist Order. Why don't you listen to my advice and surrender?" Priest Yu Ling raised his Wolf-Fanged Hammer and urged.

Yu Canghai let out an angry snort and cursed indistinctly.

Madam Zhang didn't even bother to wipe the blood off her face. Raising her short knife and aiming it at Yu Canghai, she shouted, "Once…."

Before she was able to spit out the word "again," a voice suddenly shouted out loudly, "Hold it!" A man rushed into the circle of attackers in quick strides and stopped right next to Yu Canghai.

"Seven against one, isn't that a bit unfair? Besides, didn't Mr. You clearly say that the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' was not in Yu Canghai's possession?"

he said. It was Lin Pingzhi.

Ever since he caught Yu Canghai in his eyes, Lin Pingzhi never let Yu out of his sight for a single second. After watching Yu getting injured in both arms, he knew that another round of attack from Madam Zhang and the rest attackers would have chopped Yu Canghai into shreds. His hatred toward Yu Canghai was even deeper than the ocean. He had long vowed to kill this monster, one day, with his own hands, and would never have allowed Yu Canghai to die from other people's hands. That was why he immediately stepped forward and stopped the next round of attack.

"Who the hell are you? Do you want to die with him?" Madam Zhang snapped.

"No, I don't want to die with him. I just thought this is a bit unjust, and wanted to speak out in fairness to him. Why don't we stop fighting?" Lin Pingzhi answered.

"Let's just whack him, too," Chou Songnian suggested.

"Who are you, you bold and reckless brat? Do you always take on other people's trouble?" Priest Yu Ling snubbed.

"I am Lin Pingzhi of the Huashan Sword School….," Lin Pingzhi answered.

"You are from the Huashan Sword School? Where is Young Master Linghu?" the Tung Cypress Whiz Duo, the Double-Snake Ruthless Beggar, Madam Zhang, and the rest of the group all shouted in unison.

"I am Linghu Chong," Linghu Chong cupped his hands in greeting. "I am only a boorish youngster; I certainly do not deserve the title of a 'Young Master.' Are you acquainted with a friend of mine?"

Along the journey, many prominent masters with exceptional talents or eccentric behaviors had all showed great respects and made up to him, and all of them had claimed that it had been for the sake of a friend of his. All the while, Linghu Chong still had no clue as to when he had made such an infinitely resourceful friend. When he heard the seven asking about him, he had figured

that it must have had something to do with this mystic friend, again. And sure enough, the group of seven all turned toward him and saluted respectfully.

"As soon as the seven of us received the message, we hurried over here, traveling days and nights, so we could have the honor to meet you. It's wonderful that we get to pay you a formal visit right here," Priest Yu Ling said.

Yu Canghai had been injured very badly. Finding out that the one who had stood up for him and helped him out of the predicament was actually Lin Pingzhi he was taken aback greatly. But it didn't take him long to figure out Lin Pingzhi's true intension. Seeing that the seven attackers were all in the middle of a conversation with Linghu Chong, he quickly made up his mind. He wasn't injured in his legs; so all of a sudden, he leapt backward and dashed into the back room of the small restaurant. Before anyone had any time to react, he had fled from the backdoor, speedily. Yan Sanxing and Chou Songnian both cried in surprise, but it was already too late to chase after him.

You Xun walked in front of Linghu Chong, beaming brightly. "When I came from the east," he said, "I heard many fellow martial friends mentioning about Young Master Linghu's great name. In my heart, I've been looking up to you for a long, long time. Then, when I heard that the dozens of chiefs and leaders from various sects, clans, caves, and islands would be meeting Young Master Linghu on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge, I immediately hurried over to join in the fun. I certainly didn't expect that I'd be so lucky to have met Young Master ahead of everyone else. Don't worry! You can set your heart at a rest now. This time people are bringing at least a hundred different types of catholicon to the Five-Tyrant Ridge. The little injury of yours will be cured in no time. In no time! Ha-ha! Wonderful! Wonderful!" He took Linghu Chong's hands into his own and swayed gently as he spoke, looking utterly intimate.

"What dozens of chiefs and leaders from various sects, clans, caves, and islands? What one hundred types of catholicon are you talking about? I am at a complete loss," astounded, Linghu Chong asked hurriedly.

"Don't let unnecessary worry trouble you, Young Master Linghu. Even if my guts were as large as the Heavens, I would still dare not to talk recklessly about

the reason behind. Young Master, you can just rest assured, ha-ha. I certainly dare not to talk nonsense. Even if you don't take offense, when the words get out and get into other people's ears, how many heads do I have? Even if I were ten times more slippery, sooner or later, somebody would have pulled my head off all the same."

"If you truly dare not talk nonsense, why have you brought this thing up again and again?" Madam Zhang snubbed with a gloomy face. "Whatever is happening on the Five-Tyrant Ridge, Young Master Linghu will see with his own eyes in just a short while. There is no need for you to be long-tongued here. Now, let me ask you one more time. Who on earth has that 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript' at this very moment?"

You Xun pretended that he didn't hear the words from Madam Zhang. Turning toward the Yue Buqun couple, he grinned.

"Ever since I walked in the door and saw the two of you, I've been muttering to myself: This mister and this madam both looked so dignified and elegant, showing a very distinguished demeanor. Which two eminent masters could the two of you have been? Since you are together with Young Master Linghu, I guess you must be the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School, the world-renowned 'Gentleman Sword,' Mr. Yue and Madam Yue."

"You flatter me," Yue Buqun replied with a slight smile.

"The common saying says: Have eyes but fail to see mount Taishan; entertain angel unawares. Today, I am really having eyes but fail to see mount Huashan," You Xun continued. "Recently, Mr. Yue blinded fifteen formidable foes with a simple swing of his sword. That feat shook the entire Martial World. I simply couldn't help but prostrate myself before you in admiration. What brilliant sword skills! Brilliant, indeed!"

He said these words so sincerely as though he had witnessed everything with his own eyes. Yue Buqun gave a suppressed snort as a gloomy look quickly flashed across his face.

"And Madam Yue, Heroine Ning…," You Xun went on, but was suddenly cut

shot by Madam Zhang.

“Are you ever gonna stop rambling? Speak up, who has the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?” Madam Zhang barked. She had heard the names of Yue Buqun and Madam Yue, yet didn’t show a slight sign of concern.

“Give me one hundred taels of silver, and I’ll tell you.” You Xun stretched his hand out, his face split into a wide grin.

“You must have never seen money in your past life. It always has to do with money. Money this and money that!” Madam Zhang croaked.

The one-eyed man took a silver ingot out from his chest pocket and tossed it at You Xun. “This has got to cover it. Now, speak up!” he demanded.

Catching the silver ingot into his grip, You Xun weight it in his hand. “Many thanks! Come, let’s go to the outside and I’ll tell you.”

“Why go to the outside? You can tell us right here, so we can all hear about it,” the one-eyed man replied.

“Yeah! That’s right! Why do you have to be so sneaky?” all the audiences agreed in unison.

“No way! No way!” You Xun shook his head back and forth. “I asked for one hundred taels of silver. That’s one hundred taels of silver per person, not that this piece of important news is only worth one hundred taels. How can I have sold it for so cheap? That’s just outrageous!”

The one-eyed man gave a wave with his right hand, and at that signal, Chou Songnian, Madam Zhang, Yan Sanxing, Monk Xi Bo, and the rest of the group immediately stepped forward, circling You Xun in the middle the same way they had surrounded Yu Canghai a few minutes ago.

“His nickname is Slippery and Hard to Grip. We shall not fight him with bare hands. Let’s use our weapons,” Madam Zhang exclaimed grimly.

Priest Yu Ling picked up his octagonal shaped Wolf-Fanged Hammer and waved it. “Swoosh!” The hammer made a circle in the air.

“Let’s see if his head is any slippery against my hammer.”

The sharp and pointy wolf-fangs on the hammer glinted with reflection. Taking a good glimpse of the hammer, and then taking a good look at the shining and puffy head of You Xun, everybody came to the same conclusion – You Xun’s head did not seem to have a very promising prospect.

“Young Master Linghu, only a few moments ago, a young friend from your respectful school helped Master Yu out of the tight spot with just a few words. Now when I am in deep trouble, why haven’t you said anything to help, as though you didn’t see anything or hear anything?” You Xun asked.

“If you don’t speak out the whereabouts of the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ I am afraid I’ll have to wade in and won’t be so easy on you,” Linghu Chong replied. At that word, a dull and depressing sensation rose from his stomach, and he couldn’t help but cast a side glance at Yue Lingshan, thinking, “Even you are wronging me for appropriating Little Lin’s sword art manuscript.”

“Excellent! Excellent! Young Master Linghu, please go ahead!” Madam Zhang and the rest of the group cheered all together.

You Xun heaved a deep sigh. “Fine, I’ll speak it out. Go on, return to your seats. Why are you still surrounding me?”

“We’d better be extra cautious when dealing with the Slippery and Hard to Grip,” Madam Zhang spat out.

“Alas, why did I bring trouble to myself? Why didn’t I just wait on the Five-Tyrant Ridge to join the fun, and would rather come here to court death?” You Xun heaved another sigh.

“Are you gonna speak it out or not?” Madam Zhang snapped.

“I will! I will! Why not!” You Xun answered. “Hey! Chief Dongfang! When did your Excellence decide to show your gracious presence, here?” He said the last two sentences very loud and clear, and as he spoke, he fixed his eyes toward the west end of the street outside the restaurant with such a bewildered star.

Astounded, everyone peered down the street following his gaze, and soon spotted a man strolling closer and closer along the long street, a vegetable basket hanging on his left arm. This man was a marketplace monger; how could he have been the Chief Dongfang with resounding fame – Dong Fang Invincible? By the time everybody remembered to turn back at You Xun, he had vanished from sight. By then, everyone finally realized that all had just been terribly fooled. Madam Zhang, Chou Songnian, and Priest Yu Ling all started pouring out streams of abuses, knowing well that with his outstanding Qing-Gong skills and crafty mind, there would be no way to catch him back once he had run off.

"I see! Turned out it is You Xun who has the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript.' I didn't expect that at all!" Linghu Chong said loudly.

"Really? Is it really in You Xun's hands?" everyone asked in shock.

"Of course it's in his hands. What else? Otherwise, why would he never speak out the whereabouts of the sword art manuscript, and try so hard to run away?" Linghu Chong elaborated. He spoke these words in a very loud voice, and after spitting out the last few words, he had almost used up all his strength.

"Young Master Linghu, why have you shifted the blame on me?" You Xun's voice suddenly rose from outside the door, loud and clear. And only seconds later, he had already walked back in.

Madam Zhang and the rest of the group were filled with joy. Wasting no time, they quickly surrounded You Xun in a circle, once again.

"You just fell for Young Master Linghu's stratagem!" Priest Yu Ling said, a big grin blossoming on his face.

"Alas, do I have any choice? If this piece of news had gotten out into the Martial World, saying that You Xun were the one who had the 'Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,' do you think I'd have another day of peace in the rest of my life? I wonder how many people would be after me and give me trouble. Even if I had three heads and six arms,[51] I'd still be no match for that kind of trouble. Young Master Linghu, you are good! Just a few words of yours are powerful enough to capture the Slippery and Hard to Grip." You Xun pulled a long face.

Letting out a wry smile, Linghu Chong thought to himself, “It’s not that I am good. It’s only that I had been wronged just like that, before.”

He couldn’t help but cast a glance at Yue Lingshan, and Yue Lingshan just happened to be casting a glance at him, as well. When their eyes clapped, both blushed, and turned their heads away quickly.

“Brother You, when you left a moment ago, were you hiding the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ somewhere else so we won’t be able to find it?” Madam Zhang mocked.

“That’s too bitter!” You Xun protested. “Madam Zhang, if you speak like this, you are going to cost me my old life. Please think about it, all of you. If I have had the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ I undoubtedly should be using a sword, and my sword skills should have been outstanding. Then, why firstly, I don’t even have a sword with me; secondly, I don’t fight with a sword; and thirdly, my Kung Fu skills are extremely ordinary?”

When everyone pondered over his words, all had to agree that he did sound reasonable.

“Well, maybe you never had time to study the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ after you obtained it. Maybe you tried to learn it but failed miserably. You don’t have a sword with you. Maybe somebody stole it,” Root Fairy speculated.

“Isn’t that folding fan in your hand a short sword? When you pointed it that way just a moment ago, didn’t you use a move from the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’?” Trunk Fairy exclaimed.

“That’s right! Look at him. His fan is pointing at an angle right this moment. That’s the fifty-ninth move of the Evil-Resisting Sword Art, “Pointing At Crafty and Evil.’ Whoever he points his sword to, whom he will kill.” Branch Fairy also joined in.

At the time, the folding fan in You Xun’s hand happened to be pointing toward Chou Songnian. The impetuous monk let out a thunderous roar and swung his two machetes at You Xun at once.

“Hey! Hey! He is only joking! Don’t take him seriously!” You Xun shouted hastily, dodging to the side.

Four clanking sounds echoed as Chou Songnian chopped twice with each of his machetes and You Xun blocked all of them with his folding fan. Apparently, his folding fan was made of steel. Although You Xun looked like a lord in clover, chubby with light skin tones, his movement was surprisingly agile. And only a gentle prod with his folding fan had sent the Tiger-Head Machetes swaying several feet away. One could well perceive that his Kung Fu skills had to be superior to the longhaired mendicant monk. It was only because he was in the middle of a tight encirclement that he dared not to launch his counter attack.

“This move is the thirty-second move, ‘Hard-shelled Tortoise Breaking Wind.’ Hmm, this move blocked a chop. It is the twenty-fifth move, called ‘Soft-shelled Tortoise Turning Over’,” Flower Fairy shouted along.

“Mr. You, if the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript’ is really not in your possession, then who has it?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Yeah! Speak up! Who has it?” Madam Zhang, Priest Yu Ling and the rest people all asked anxiously.

“The only reason I am keeping this to myself is to be able to make a few thousand taels of silver,” You Xun squeezed out a grin. “But since you are so stingy and have made up your mind to save money, fine, I’ll tell you. But don’t say that I didn’t warn you. Once you hear about it, you’ll only be able to itch in your heart and there’s absolutely nothing you can do about it. If it were somebody else who had laid his hands on the ‘Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,’ at least you’d still have some hope. But it is so unfortunate that it had to be this one who has it in his possession, there’s…there’s…well, well…”

Everybody held his breath and listened on anxiously for You Xun to tell the name of the person, who had the sword art manuscript in his possession. Suddenly, sounds of hoof beats mixed up with sounds of horse-drawn wagons broke out on the street and came closer and closer. You Xun seized the opportunity and stopped telling. Turning his head sideways, he listened, and

then asked, “Err, who’s that?”

“Speak it out! Who has the sword art manuscript?” Priest Yu Ling pressed on.

“There’s no need to be impatient. Of course I’ll tell you,” You Xun replied.

The sounds of hoof beats and wagons stopped abruptly outside the small restaurant. “Is Young Master Linghu here? Our faction has prepared horses and wagons to greet your gracious presence,” an aged voice announced.

Linghu Chong was anxious to find out the whereabouts of the “Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript,” thus, prove his innocence and remove the suspicions from Master, Master-Wife, fellow apprentices and little apprentice sister. Therefore, he didn’t reply to the call from the outside and urged You Xun again, “There are other people coming. Hurry up, tell us!”

“I beg your pardon, Young Master. Just because other people are coming, it wouldn’t be a good idea to tell now,” You Xun replied.

Sound of more hoof beats rose from the distance, and soon another seven or eight riders arrived and stopped right in front of the restaurant.

“Chief Huang, are you here to greet Young Master Linghu?” a gallant voice asked.

“Yes, I am. What have brought Chieftain Sima here today?” the old man replied.

The man with the gallant voice snorted, and soon heavy footsteps echoed as a giant man entered the restaurant in big strides.

“Which of you is Young Master Linghu? I am Sima Big. I’ve come to greet Young Master and bring him to Five-Tyrant Ridge to meet the many heroes,” he announced loudly.

Having no alternatives, Linghu Chong cupped his hands in greeting. “I am Linghu Chong. I certainly do not deserve such gracious amenity from Chieftain Sima.”

“Because I’ve always been big and tall since I was only a kid, my parents

named me Sima Big. Young Master Linghu, you can call me Sima Big, or just Biggy. Don't call me Chieftain. I don't deserve it in front of you," Chieftain Sima exclaimed.

"You flatter me," Linghu Chong replied. Pointing at Yue Buqun and Madam Yue, he introduced, "These are my Master and my Master-Wife."

"Hello there!" Sima Big cupped his hands and greeted. Turning back toward Linghu Chong, he said, "Young Master, I apologize for not having greeted you earlier. Will you please pardon me?"

Yue Buqun had held the Head Master post of the Huashan Sword School for over twenty years and had always been well respected by people in the Martial World. But people like this Sima Big, Madam Zhang, Chou Songnian, Priest Yu Ling, or the rest of the bunch, who showed great respect to Linghu Chong, all had very little concern about the Head Master of the Huashan Sword School. Even if they did show him a little bit of respect, occasionally, it was all for the sake of Linghu Chong, and they didn't even try to hide that. To Yue Buqun, this was even worse than cursing him to his face, and he was exasperated. But Yue Buqun was a very civilized man, and didn't show any of his irritation on his face.

By then, the chief named Huang had also entered the room. He was well over eighty years of age. The bush of completely grey beard under his chin almost reached his chest, but he looked hale and hearty. Bowing slightly toward Linghu Chong, he said, "Young Master Linghu, the many brothers in our faction make our living right around this region. We've failed terribly to put up a good reception for you. Even death cannot atone our offense."

"Could this have been him?" Yue Buqun felt a big shock in his heart. He had known for a long time that there was a faction named "Heavenly River Faction" around the lower reaches of the Yellow River, and the chief, Huang Boliu, was a very senior master in the Martial World. But the faction lacked strict rules and regulations, and among the many members, the good and bad were intermingled. It was simply unavoidable to have members violate laws and commit crimes. Therefore, the reputation of the "Heavenly River Faction" was

not that great. However, the many hands provided great strength, and the faction did not lack first class fighters. It was a very large faction in the region of four provinces. Could this old man in front of him have been the “Silver-Bearded Dragon,” Huang Boliu, who commanded over ten thousand faction members? If this were him, indeed, then why had he shown such great respect toward Linghu Chong, a young lad who was only at the beginning of his career?

The doubts and suspicions that boggled Yue Buqun’s mind didn’t last very long, when the Double-Snake Ruthless Beggar Yan Sanxing spoke to the old man.

“Hi, Silver-Bearded Old Dragon, you are the local bully. Aren’t you going to welcome us, the bunch of visitors?”

The grey-bearded old man was indeed the “Silver-Bearded Dragon” Huang Boliu. “We’ll have to thank Young Master Linghu,” he said, smiling. “If it weren’t for his sake, how could I ever have so many masters and heroes spare their gracious presence. Now that you are all here, you are all noble guests of the ‘Heavenly River Faction.’ Of course we welcome you. Our faction has prepared a big feast on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge. May I ask Young Master Linghu and the rest of the friends here to set out and head over there?”

The small restaurant had become so crowded by now. Linghu Chong knew that You Xun would never speak out the secret in such a completely packed and noisy place. Luckily, after this incident with You Xun, the suspicions Master, Master-Wife, and all the fellow apprentices had should have been greatly diminished. He was sure that the whole thing would, one day, come to obvious. Having that in mind, he was no longer in an urgent rush to clear himself of the blame.

“Master, should we go or not? Will you please direct us,” turning to Yue Buqun, he asked.

Yue Buqun thought to himself, “It’s apparent that among the bunch of people gathering on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge, there isn’t going to be a single one from the orthodox schools. How can I mix myself up with them? It almost

seems that these people are tempting Chong to join them using courtesy and respect. The incident with Liu Zhengfeng of the Hengshan Sword School had set a good example. If one becomes close with evil people, then he cannot escape the fate of being utterly discredited, himself. But under the current circumstance, how could I say no?"

"Mr. Yue, the Five-Tyrant Ridge is bustling with people and activities at the moment! Many chiefs of different caves and islands haven't made an appearance in the Martial World for ten, twenty, or even thirty years. Everyone came for the sake of Young Master Linghu, and it is you, Mr. Yue, who have shaped him into such a wonderful young hero of both civil and military ability. You have brought great glory to yourself for accomplishing such a great feat. Of course you'd want to go to the Five-Tyrant Ridge. If Mr. Yue doesn't go, wouldn't that disappoint a lot of people?"

Before Yue Buqun even had a chance to answer, half supporting and half carrying, Sima Big and Huang Boliu had ushered Linghu Chong out of the restaurant door and into one of the horse-drawn wagons. Chou Songnian, Yan Sanxing, the Tung Cypress Whiz Duo, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies, and the rest of the bunch also rushed out of the door in a hubbub.

Yue Buqun and Madam Yue stared at each other and both squeezed a wry smile. "These people only wanted to make sure that Chong would go there. Whether we are going or not, they didn't care at all," they thought.

"Dad! Why don't we go and have a look? Let's find out what kind of tricks these weird people are playing with big apprentice brother," Yue Lingshan proposed, her curiosity growing by the minute. For a while, she remembered the human-flesh-eating Black Bear and White Bear, and her heart hammered frantically. Figuring that if they were able to set her free for big apprentice brother's sake, then logically, they shouldn't be coming back to chew on her fingers, she relaxed a little. But she still made up her mind that after they arrived at the Five-Tyrant Ridge, she would make sure to keep a close distance with her father.

Yue Buqun nodded his approval and then walked out of the door. After the

miserable vomiting experience, he didn't eat or drink anything, and now when he walked about, it almost felt as if he was slightly disoriented and could not stand in a solid stance. A quick check with his inner energy confirmed that the inner energy he was able to gather was not as pure as it used to be, and Yue Buqun couldn't help feeling stunned.

"The poison from Blue Phoenix of the Five-Sylph Sect is truly powerful," he muttered to himself.

The group with Huang Boliu and the group with Sima Big both came with many horses, so they were able to spare some horses for Yue Buqun, Madam Yue, Madam Zhang, Chou Songnian, the Peach Valley's Six Fairies, and the rest of the bunch to ride. Some male apprentices of the Huashan Sword School didn't have any horse left for ride, and had to walk together with members of the "Heavenly River Faction" and subordinates of the Chieftain Sima Big of the Long-Whale Island. Everything ready and set, they set out toward the Five-Tyrant Ridge.

Chapter 17: In Love

Translated by Lanny Lin



Half of the girl's face could be seen from the reflection in the water. Her eyes were shut tight. Long eyelashes swayed in the wind. She was a gorgeous-looking girl seventeen or eighteen years of age.

The Five-Tyrant Ridge lay right at where the Shandong Province and the Henan Province bordered each other, west to Heze and Dingtao in the Shandong Province, and east to Dongming of the Henan Province. The terrains around the region were mostly made up of flat lands with swamp country. From a distance, the Five-Tyrant Ridge didn't appear to be a tall mountain but rather just a small hill. The group of horse riders and wagons galloped toward the east and after

every few miles or so, there would always be several riders coming from the east to greet them. Dismounting from their horses right next to the wagon, they would shout their greetings to Linghu Chong with raised voices, acting very respectfully with great courtesy.

The closer they were from the Five-Tyrant Ridge, the more people greeted them alongside the road. Although every one of them gave a brief self-introduction of himself, Linghu Chong could not remember the great amount of information. Finally, the horse-drawn wagon stopped in front of a tall ridge. The ridge of hill was covered by a dense mass of pine trees, and a mountain road zigzagged upward, leading to the top.

Huang Boliu helped Linghu Chong out of the horse-drawn wagon to the side of the road, where two big fellows carrying a bamboo carriage had been waiting. Thinking that Master, Master-Wife and little apprentice sister would have to climb up the ridge on foot while he took the carriage, Linghu Chong felt uneasiness brewing inside him.

"Master-Wife, why don't you take the wagon? I can walk by myself," he suggested.

"The Young Master Linghu is the one they are greeting, not your Master-Wife," Madam Yue replied with a grin before striding up the mountain road, followed by Yue Buqun and their daughter, Yue Lingshan.

Having no other alternatives, Linghu Chong sat down in the bamboo carriage chair. The two carriers lifted the carriage and soon entered a large clearing in the middle of the woods on top of the hill, where patches of crowds had scattered about all over it. Judging from the looks and expressions of these people, Linghu Chong knew that these were all the kind of rough fellows from the unorthodox factions of the Martial World. At the sight of Linghu Chong's arrival, the crowd rushed forward like a swarm of bees.

"Is this the Young Master Linghu?" many asked eagerly.

"Here are some panaceas passed done from my ancestors that can return the dead to life," a man shouted.

“I dug this matured, human-shaped ginseng[52] out in Mount Changbai twenty years ago. Young Master Linghu, will you please have it!” another one offered.

“These seven men are the most skilled and renowned doctors in the eastern Shandong Province. I’ve invited them here to check on Young Master Linghu’s pulse,” a third person announced.

All seven doctors were tied up tightly around their wrists, and a rope stringed them all together. Looking wan and sallow, each of them showed a gloomy face, none had any trace of superiority, the kind normally displayed on the face of a renowned doctor, left in him. Obviously the man had kidnapped them all, and the word “invitation” was far from the truth.

“I’ve taken a little bit of every kind of precious medicine in the entire Jinan City, so if Young Master Linghu needs anything specific, we won’t be unprepared,” carrying two large bamboo basket on his shoulders, a man declared.

Most of the people in the crowd are rough and coarse fellows, and many dressed in strange and unusual outfits, but Linghu Chong had no doubt about their sincerity and was utterly grateful. Having suffered many setbacks just lately and having been living on the brink of death for the last many days, Linghu Chong found himself much more emotional. At the sight of the many caring faces, a warm feeling swelled in his heart, and soon big drops of tears rolled down his cheeks.

“Dear friends, Linghu Chong is only a nobody in this world, yet the many of you…have shown me great care and concern…I really don’t know…don’t know how I’ll ever be able to repay your kindness….” cupping his hands in greetings, Linghu Chong spoke, but only after a few sentences, he choked with sobs. Not able to express his gratitude with words, he knelt down and bowed his head to solute, which immediately caused uproar in the crowd.

“We certainly don’t deserve such high honor!” “Please, please stand up!” “You are really embarrassing us now.” Amid the many scattered replies, people in the crowd also knelt down on their knees and saluted back. Within moments, except

Yue Buqun, the group of Huashan apprentices, and the Peach Valley's Six Fairies, the over one thousand people atop the Five-Tyrant Ridge were all on their knees. Didn't want to give the misimpression of taking the salute from the many people, Yue Buqun and the rest of the Huashan members turned sideways and took a few steps back, while the Peach Valley's Six Fairies pointed their fingers at the crowd in total amusement, spilling streams of drivels and laughing their heads off.

After several bows, Linghu Chong stood back up, tears streaming out from his eyes. "Regardless of what intention these friends have, I am willing to risk any danger for their sake, even if I'll have my body smashed into pieces," he thought to himself.

"Young Master Linghu, this way please. You can take a rest at the shack over there," Chief Huang Boliu of the Heavenly River Faction proposed and then ushered Linghu Chong and the Yue Buqun couple into a shack.

The shack was made of straws and appeared to have just being built very recently. A table and a few chairs occupied the middle of the shack, and a teakettle and a set of teacups sat on top of the table. Huang Boliu waved his hand, and immediately, his subordinates brought in wine and poured a cup for each of them. More people walked in and brought plates of beef jerky, ham, and the kind of snacks that goes well with wine. Linghu Chong picked up the cup in front of him and then walked out of the shack.

"Dear friends," he spoke out loud, "this is the first time I've met many of you, so naturally we need a toast for the new friendship. From now on, you are all good friends of Linghu Chong. Starting from today, we'll share joy and sorrow, weal and woe. Let all of us, all good friends here, start by sharing this cup of wine first!" At that word, he swung his right arm and poured the wine in the cup toward the sky, which immediately separated into thousands of small drops and splashed everywhere.

"Young Master Linghu said it right! Starting from today, we'll share joy and sorrow, weal and woe, with you!" cheers resounded like rolls of thunder as the crowd replied in unison.

Yue Buqun knitted his brows as he thought to himself, “Chong is behaving so rashly and unruly, having no concern about the consequences of his action. When he saw that these people cared for him, he didn’t even think before saying that he would share joy and sorrow, weal and woe with them. Among these people here, most likely not even a single one of them is a law-abiding citizen, and many might have easily fallen into the same league as the notorious Tian Boguang. When they raid homes and plunder houses, rape and loot, are you going to share the joy? When we, people of the orthodox schools, exterminate these hoodlums, are you going to share the sorrow?”

“Why all the friends here, today, are caring so much for me, Linghu Chong, I have no clue,” Linghu Chong went on. “But whether I know, or don’t know, that doesn’t matter. Whatever the puzzledom is, you can tell it to my face. A true man is as open as the day, and always speaks out his mind. If there’s anything Linghu Chong can do for you, even if I have to climb a hill of knifes or go through a forest of swords, I dare not to decline.”

He had thought that these people didn’t even know each other before, yet all tried very hard to befriend him, then naturally they must have something very important that needed his help. Since he was going to give his word anyhow, even if that was something he was incapable of doing, so what? He was going to die very soon anyway.

“Where did you get that idea, Young Master Linghu,” Huang Boliu answered. “The many friends here heard that Young Master was coming, and out of admiration and respect, all of us just happen to coincide and gathered here, so we can have a look at your elegant demeanor with reverence. We also heard that Young Master was not feeling well, that’s why some of us invited renowned doctors, and some others gathered different kinds of medicine. We definitely have no request of any kind for Young Master. We are not from the same group. Many of us have only heard about each other before, and some didn’t even get along. But since Young Master have said that we should share joy and sorrow, weal and woe, starting from today, even if we weren’t good friends before among ourselves, we are good friends now.”

“Naturally! Chief Huang said it perfectly,” the crowd replied all together.

“Young Master, why don’t you go back in the shack and have these seven renowned doctors check out your pulse?” the man who pulled a string of doctors behind him stepped forward and suggested.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, “Even Doctor Ping One-Finger, such an extraordinary doctor has concluded that there’s no cure for my injuries, what else could the seven doctors of yours find?” But for fear of hurting the man’s good intension, he could not object, and had to step back inside the shack. The man dragged the seven doctors into the shack as if they were a string of frogs, which brought a grin on Linghu Chong’s face.

“This brother, why don’t you set them free. I am sure they won’t be able to run away,” Linghu Chong proposed.

“If Young Master says so,” the man answered, and soon broke the rope into pieces with six popping sounds. “If you can’t cure Young Master Linghu, I’ll break your necks the same way,” he yelled at the doctors.

“I…I’ll try my best. But there’s…there’s no doctor who can always guarantee a cure,” one of the doctors muttered.

“Young Master here is glowing with health and radiating vigor. I am sure his illness can be easily rid off with a dose of medicament,” another doctor added immediately as all of them rushed forward to check Linghu Chong’s pulse.

Suddenly someone shouted at the shack’s doorway, “Get out of here, all of you! You useless quacks!”

Linghu Chong turned his head around and immediately spotted “Killer Doctor” Ping One-Finger.

“Doctor Ping, you’ve come too. I thought none of these doctors would have been of any use,” he said happily.

Ping One-Finger entered the shack. Raising his left foot, he suddenly threw a kick at one of the doctors. Bang! The doctor flew out of the shack. Without any delay, he raised his right foot. With another loud bang, a second doctor was

kicked out of the shack.

The man who had brought all the doctors along seemed to have quite an awe against Ping One-Finger. Turning toward the group of doctors, he yelled loudly.

"Doctor Ping, the number one doctor in the world, has arrived. How dare you show yourselves up in front of him?"

Another two loud bangs rose as the man also kicked two of the doctors out of the shack. Terrified, the rest three doctors staggered out of the shack. The man bowed timidly with a smiling face, obviously trying to please Ping One-Finger.

"Young Master Linghu, Doctor Ping, I wasn't thinking right. Will you please pardon…?" he said, when suddenly, Ping One-Finger raised his left foot, and with another loud bang, sending the man flying out of the shack.

Linghu Chong was astounded, having not expected such a result at all. Without saying another word, Ping One-Finger took a seat next to Linghu Chong and placed his fingers on Linghu Chong's right wrist to check his pulse. After a good while, he switched to Linghu Chong's left wrist and began checking this one instead. After another good while, he switched back to Linghu Chong's right wrist once again. Thus, switching back and forth, he checked Linghu Chong's pulse again and again. Knitting his brows almost into a straight line, he pondered with all his might, his eyes shut tightly.

"Doctor Ping!" Linghu Chong finally broke the silence. "Life and death lie in the lap of fate. My injury is just too severe to cure. It has already troubled you twice, and I simply can't be thankful enough for your kindness. There is really no need to trouble you any further."

Loud noise and excitement rose from the outside, soon followed by the sounds of people playing wine games on top of their tongues – apparently people from the "Heavenly River Faction" had brought in shipments of food and wine to supply the crowd. Linghu Chong's mind seemed to have slipped out from the shack so he could join the crowd outside to have a jolly time, but Ping One-Finger switched back and forth with his two wrists, as though there was never going to be an end to it.

“Doctor Ping’s name is Ping One-Finger,” Linghu Chong thought to himself secretly, “and he always claimed that he only needed one finger to check one’s pulse for a cure and only one finger to seal one’s acupoint for a kill. But look how many fingers is he using on me now? If I am not mistaken, he is using all ten of them.”

A loud cracking sound suddenly interrupted his thought. A man stuck his head inside the shack, and it turned out to be the Trunk Fairy.

“Linghu Chong! Why aren’t you drinking wine with us?” Trunk Fairy asked.

“I’ll be right there. You’d better wait for me! Don’t get yourself filled up too quickly,” Linghu Chong answered.

“Sure!” Trunk Fairy replied. “Doctor Ping, you’d better hurry up!” At that word, he pulled his head out.

Slowly, Ping One-Finger drew his hands away from Linghu Chong’s wrists. Eyes still shutting tight, he drummed his right index finger on the table gently as though greatly puzzled. Opening his eyes after a long while, he finally spoke.

“Young Master Linghu! There are seven types of energy streams inside your body, constantly crashing against each other. There is no passageway for them to exit out, and there’s no hope to tame them either. This is neither a case of poison, nor a wound inflicted by a blade, much less illness caused by cold or fever, thus not something treatable with medicine or acupuncture.”

“Right,” Linghu Chong acknowledged.

“Since that day when I checked your pulse in the town of Zhuxian, I’ve already figured out a solution, which, with some luck, might work the wonder. I was going to gather seven martial arts masters, who have superb and resourceful inner energy, to work on you all at once, and eradicate the seven types of energy streams once for all. I’ve already invited three of them to come here today. It shouldn’t be difficult to find two more qualified masters among the crowd. Then when you count your Master, Mr. Yue, and I in, everything would have been ready. But when I checked your pulse just now, I couldn’t help noticing some dramatic changes in the situation, which completely complicated things to

the extreme."

"Oh!" Linghu Chong responded.

"During the last several days, four dramatic changes had taken place. Change number one: Young Master took dozens of ultra-nutritious tonics, among which were precious medicaments such as ginseng, Polygonum multiflorum, Glossy Ganoderma, Tuckahoe, and the like. But the effects of these tonics were actually intended for female patients."

"Wow!" Linghu Chong exclaimed. "You are absolutely right! That's amazing! Such excellent skills had to be rare in all ages."

"Why did Young Master take these tonics?" Ping One-Finger went on. "Most probably a quack was to blame. How detestable and irritating!"

"Zu Qianqiu thought he was doing me a favor when he stole Old Man's 'Life-Extending Eight Pills' to feed me," Linghu Chong thought to himself. "How could he have known that there are different tonics between male and female? If I spill the beans, for sure Doctor Ping would blame him. It's probably better if I just keep this to myself." At that thought, he said, "It's my own fault. I can't really blame anybody else."

"You didn't lack any energy. Quite on the contrary, you had too much energy in you. Now when you suddenly took so much of these tonics, you've worsened the case. Think about it. If the water in the Yangtze River has already risen to a dangerous height, what will happen if the water controller keeps directing even more water into it from the Dongting Lake and the Boyang Lake? A Disaster! These types of tonics would only have benefited congenitally deficient young females. Unfortunately Young Master took them. Alas! How Harmful!"

"I just hope Miss Old Not-Dead, the daughter of Old Man, will eventually recover after drinking my blood," Linghu Chong thought.

"Change number two: Young Master, you have lost a great amount of blood all of a sudden. How could you have gotten yourself into fights and brawls so recklessly with your already injured body? Scrambling for supremacy with fierce means in no way leads to a prolonged life. Alas, that one thought so

highly of you, yet you have no regard for yourself. A true man can wait ten years before seeking his revenge; why couldn't you have waited a bit longer and had to seek the instant pleasure?" Ping One-Finger shook his head again and again as he spoke, a disapprobatory expression brewing on his face. If his patient weren't Linghu Chong, he would probably have smacked him hard on the face, or, at least, have poured out endless of invectives.

"You are absolutely right, senior master," Linghu Chong replied.

"If your losing much blood were the only problem we have to worry about, it would still have been manageable. But why did you mix yourself up with people from the Yunnan Five-Sylph Sect and drank their Five-Sylph Mega-Nourishing Wine?" Ping One-Finger's voice became more and more irritated.

"Five-Sylph Mega-Nourishing Wine?" Linghu Chong repeated in surprise.

"Yes, the Five-Sylph Mega-Nourishing Wine – brewed using the secret formula of the Five-Sylph Sect passed down generation after generation," Ping One-Finger murmured. The five venomous pests in the wine were extremely precious. It was said that each one takes decades to cultivate. There are also dozens kinds of rare plants in the wine, together with the five venomous pests, they produce a strange yet powerful balance. The drinker of this wine will be void of harm from all diseases and poisons, and also gain inner energy worth ten years of training. It is the most miraculous tonic existing in the world. I've yearned for a chance to see it for many years. I heard that Blue Phoenix the girl always maintains a good moral integrity and never even looks encouragingly to any man. Who would have expected that she would give you the most precious medicated wine of her sect? Alas, the loose youth, stealing young girls' hearts wherever he goes, ignorant of the harm this has brought upon himself!"

Linghu Chong couldn't help but let out an embarrassed smile. "Chief Blue and I have only met once before. It was on our boat when we sailed east along the Yellow River. I am indebted to her for presenting me the Five-Sylph Wine. But other than that, we had no association whatsoever," he explained.

After gazing at him for a good while, Ping One-Finger nodded.

“In that case, I suppose it was only for the sake of that one, did Blue Phoenix give you the Five-Sylph Mega-Nourishing Wine. But the extra nourishment only resulted in more energy inside you, which, in turn, caused more damage. Besides, even though the wine is mega-nourishing, it is mega-poisonous, also. Damn! What a big mess this is! All they have at the Five-Sylph Sect are a few odd prescriptions passed down from past generations. What stinking nonsense medical principles did Blue Phoenix the little chick understand? What a god damned big mess this is in!” Ping One-Finger went frantic.

Linghu Chong listened on as Ping One-Finger poured out streams of profanities. “He’s certainly gotten an unusually hot temper,” he couldn’t help thinking. But then as soon as he noticed Ping One-Finger’s gloomy face and the fluctuating chest below, obviously from the sincere caring for his well being, he regretted it.

“Senior master Ping, Chief Blue only had good intentions….” he said.

“Good intentions! Good intentions! Humph! When the many quacks misdiagnosed their patients and got them killed, which one of them didn’t have good intentions? You tell me! Did you know that people die everyday because of misdiagnoses from quacks are far more than people who die from a blade in the Martial World?” Ping One-Finger snarled.

“There’s a good possibility that might happen,” Linghu Chong replied.

“What possibility? That’s the fact,” Ping One-Finger bellowed. “What makes Blue Phoenix think that she can just stick her nose in this? Who the hell does she think she is, messing with my patient? At the moment, your blood contains severe poisons. If I attempt to neutralize them one by one, they would clash violently with the seven types of energy streams inside you, and you wouldn’t even last three hours.”

“Those severe poisons in my blood probably have nothing to do with the Five-Sylph Wine I drank,” Linghu Chong couldn’t help but think. “Chief Blue and those four Miao girls used their own blood when they gave blood to me. They live and deal with poisonous pests day and night, even their food has

poisonous element, then naturally their blood must have contained various poisons. Only that they've grown accustomed to that, and the various poisons could no longer affect their bodies. I'd better not mention a word about this, or else, he might lose his temper completely." At that thought, he said, "Medical principles and pharmacology are subtle and abstruse subjects. It's only naturally that a common person won't be able to understand them thoroughly.'

Ping One-Finger heaved a sigh and then went on. "If taking the tonics by mistake, losing a great deal of blood, and drinking the medicinal wine were all the problems there are, I can still manage to overcome. But the fourth dramatic change has really left me at a loss as to what to do. Alas, you've only have yourself to blame for that!"

"Yes, I have only myself to blame," Linghu Chong echoed.

"In the last several days, why have you suddenly become so downhearted and completely lost the will to live? What happened? What caused the grievance? Last time when I checked your pulse at the town of Zhuxian, even though you were severely injured, I could still feel the vigorous flow in your heart arteries with thriving vitality. That was when I decided to extend your life for another one hundred days, so I could try my best to find a way to cure your bizarre injury within the one hundred days. At that time, I was not one hundred percent certain about the solution, and didn't have the need to explain everything to you. But why have you completely lost the thriving vitality?"

At that question, a strong feeling of sorrow instantly swelled up in Linghu Chong's heart as he thought to himself, "Before, when Master had suspected me of embezzling Little Lin's Evil-Resisting Sword Manuscript, it was still alright. With a clear conscience, I felt no qualms. Eventually doubts will clear up when facts are known. But…but even little apprentice sister began suspecting me, and thought of me as a worthless thief deep in her heart for the sake of Little Lin. That snuffed the last bit of life out of me. There would be no joy for me to continue living in this world."

But Ping One-Finger did not wait for him to answer and spoke again. "Your pulse is telling me that this, again, has something to do with the remorse of love.

Can't you see that all women in the world have a detestable face and a dull tongue? It would be best if you can keep your distance from them. Only when you fail at avoiding them should you tolerate with utmost effort and deal with them courteously but without sincerity. Why are you so muddleheaded and longing for them day and night, instead? That's so very much wrong! Although, although that one…alas, I don't know what I should say about that!" At that word, he shook his head wearily.

"Your wife certainly has a detestable face and a dull tongue," Linghu Chong thought, "but it's not necessary that women in the world are all like that. It's so funny that you are using your own wife to generalize all women in the world. If little apprentice sister were to have a detestable face and a dull tongue…"

His thoughts were interrupted when Flower Fairy suddenly showed up at the entrance of the shack, each hand holding a large bowl filled with wine.

"Hey, Doctor Ping! Have you cured him yet?" Flower Fairy asked.

"He is incurable!" Ping One-Finger grunted, pulling a long face.

"Incurable?" Flower Fairy was taken by surprise. "Whacha gonna do then?" Turning toward Linghu Chong, he said, "Why don't you come out and drink with us then."

"Sure!" Linghu Chong replied.

"No, you won't! You stay here!" Ping One-Finger bellowed in a croaked voice.

That gave Flower Fairy a good fright. Turning on his wheels, he left in a hurry, splashing the bowls of wine all over himself.

"Young Master Linghu," Ping One-Finger spoke again, this time in a much calmer voice. "Even God himself would probably have a real hard time healing you completely. It is still possible to extend your life for several more months or even several more years, though. But you must listen to my advice. Firstly, you must abstain from wine. Secondly, you must stop being fanciful and fickle. Stay away from all women. You can't even fancy any woman, period. Thirdly, you

must not get into fights with others. If you successfully abstain yourself from wine, women, and fights, then you can probably live a few years longer."

Linghu Chong suddenly broke into a loud laugher.

"What's so funny," Ping One-Finger snarled.

"When a man lives his life, he has got to enjoy himself carefree. If he couldn't even drink wine, fancy women, or defend himself when bullied, what good is he? He'd rather die before it's too late, to end it quickly."

"I demand you to abstain yourself. If I can't cure you, my reputation will be completely ruined," Ping One-Finger snapped.

Reaching out with his left hand, Linghu Chong held onto the back of Ping One-Finger's right hand. "Senior master Ping, I am utterly grateful for your great kindness. But life and death lie in the lap of fate. Even with your most excellent skills, it is still no use to try to cure someone destined to die. Not being able to cure my injury will not affect senior master's reputation in the least."

Crack! Another man stuck his head inside the shack, and it was Root Fairy this time. "Linghu Chong, are you all cured?" he shouted.

"Doctor Ping's skills are miraculous! He has already cured me," Linghu Chong answered.

"Wonderful! Wonderful!" Root Fairy cried. Rushing into the shack and grabbing Linghu Chong by his sleeves, he pulled. "Let's go drink! Let's go drink!"

"Senior master, many thanks!" Linghu Chong bowed deeply toward Ping One-Finger, who totally ignored Linghu Chong and only murmured indistinguishable to himself.

"I knew he'd be able to cure you. He is the 'Killer Doctor', isn't he? Every time when he cures one, he has to kill on. If he can't cure one, what is he gonna do, then? Wouldn't that be troublesome?" Root Fairy grinned.

"Nonsense!" Linghu Chong also grinned, and hand in hand, the two of them walked out of the shack.

People in the clearing had all been drinking merrily in clusters for a good while by now. When Linghu Chong walked among them, they kept presenting more and more wine to him, and to everybody's greatest satisfaction, Linghu Chong would pour it straight down his throat every time. Seeing how Linghu Chong laughed and joked together with them at ease and kept drinking to the limit of his capacity, everybody was overjoyed. "Young Master Linghu's heroic spirit shines above the ninth heaven! We are filled with heartfelt admiration," they all said.

After drinking over a dozen bowls of wine in succession, Linghu Chong remembered Ping One-Finger. Filling a bowl with wine and singing "Enjoy the wine today while you still can" loudly, he walked back into the shack.

"Senior master Ping, I propose a toast for you!" he said, but what he saw startled him, and the shock instantly sobered him up.

Under the fluttering candlelight, Ping One-Finger's face appeared to have gone through dramatic changes. A more careful glance soon revealed the differences. The entirely dark hair on his head just moments ago had turned completely gray, and his once smooth and silky face now had deep wrinkles all over it. Within the mere half-an-hour, Ping One-Finger seemed to have aged twenty years. Huddled up by the corner of the table, he was still murmuring to himself.

"When I cure one, I have to kill one. When I can't cure one, what do I do, then?"

"Linghu Chong's life does not really worth much. Senior master, why can't you just let it go?" Burning with the utmost gratitude, Linghu Chong exclaimed loudly.

"If I can't cure one, I'll just have to kill myself, to suit the name 'Killer Doctor'," Ping One-Finger murmured. He stood up all of a sudden, and after swaying slightly a few times, he spat out a mouthful of blood and then collapsed to the ground.

Astounded, Linghu Chong ran forward and propped Doctor Ping's head in his arms, only to find that Ping One-Finger had stopped breathing. Carrying the

body in his arms, Linghu Chong stood up slowly, sorrow welling up in his chest. Gradually, the noises of drinking and partying outside died away as silence slowly swept across, and the feeling of loneliness and desolation soon filled his heart. He just stood there quietly as drops of tears rolled down his cheeks and fell to his feet. Ping One-Finger's body seemed to have become heavier and heavier; feeling completely exhausted, he no longer had enough strength to carry it, and had to put it back down to the ground gently.

"Young Master Linghu!" a man walked into the shack quietly and called out in a whisper.

With a quick glance, Linghu Chong recognized him immediately. It was Zu Qianqiu.

"Senior master Zu! Doctor Ping has just passed away," he murmured in a mournful voice. But Zu Qianqiu didn't seem to care much about it, and only whispered to him again.

"Young Master Linghu, I've come to ask you for a favor. If anyone asks you about me, would you mind saying that you've never met Zu Qianqiu before?"

"Why's that?" Quite taken aback, Linghu Chong asked.

"It's really nothing. Only that…only that…er…I'll see you," Zu Qianqiu replied.

As soon as Zu Qianqiu walked out of the shack, another man entered. It was Sima Big this time.

"Young Master Linghu, I have this really embarrassing…er…embarrassing favor…well…if anyone asks you who have gathered on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge, would you please don't mention my name? I'd really, really appreciate that."

"Sure, but what for?" Linghu Chong replied.

Sima Big's face suddenly turned bashful, as if he were a kid who had just been caught with his hand in the cookie jar. "That…er…that…," he murmured haltingly.

“If Linghu Chong is not worthy to be your friend, I certainly dare not to claim kinship,” Linghu Chong said coldly.

At those words, Sima Big’s face turned scarlet, and in the next minute, he was already on his knees, bowing down deeply.

“Young Master Linghu, that’s not how I feel at all. I was only asking you to not mention about my coming to the Five-Tyrant Ridge so I don’t make someone angry. If Young Master is still doubtful, then just forget about what I said. I was just breaking wind.”

“You are been too courteous,” Linghu Chong prodded Sima Big up and said hurriedly. “May I ask you a question, Chieftain? Why is it that your coming to the Five-Tyrant Ridge to see me would make someone angry? If this someone detests Linghu Chong so utterly, he can feel free to come after me, and me only….”

Sima Big shoot his hands disapprovingly at once. “What are you talking about, Young Master?” He grinned. “This someone couldn’t have been more fond of you. Why would there be any ill feelings? Alas, I am so crude, putting my foot in my mouth again. Goodbye, Young Master. Well, in a word, Sima Big likes you very much! If there’s anything you ever need me for, anything at all, just give me a howl, and even if I have to step through water or fire to get there, I’ll be there. If I even show a slight frown, I am a stinking, rotten tortoise egg!” He gave a hard smack to his own chest and then strode out of the shack, leaving a very confused Linghu Chong inside, alone.

“It’s unquestionable that he was all sincere about what he said to me,” Linghu Chong thought to himself, “but why is it that his coming to the Five-Tyrant Ridge would make someone angry? Yet, the one who is angry about it not only has no ill feelings about me, but also cared for me very much. This is really weird! If that someone is truly fond of me, he should have been very pleased that I’ve made so many friends.” Suddenly an idea came upon him. “Oh, I got it. This someone must have been a senior master from an orthodox school, that’s why he was very fond of me, yet did not want me to befriend people from the unorthodox sects. Could he be Grand Uncle-Master Feng? But people like that

Chieftain Sima are simple and frank. What's wrong about making friends with them?"

"Young Master Linghu?" Someone cleared his throat and called out in a low voice.

"Chief Huang, come in please," Linghu Chong replied, recognizing Huang Boliu's voice.

"Young Master Linghu, several friends wanted me to take a message to you. They had to run in light of some urgent matters that just suddenly arose and didn't have any time to spare for a proper farewell. They ask for your pardon," Huang Boliu said after entering the shack.

"That's no problem," Linghu Chong replied. And sure enough, the noises from outside had become barely auditable and most of the people probably have already left.

"Well," Huang Boliu continued hesitantly, "this time, we've really rushed our fences. First of all, everybody was a bit curious; and secondly, all just wanted to make up to the…Who would have thought…well, of course, a thin-skinned one naturally wouldn't want to make this widely known. But we are just a bunch of boors and none had a clue. Besides, Chief Blue is a Miao girl, that…."

Huang Boliu just kept uttering words that did not even hang together, and Linghu Chong found himself bewildered.

"Chief Huang, are you trying to ask me to not mention what happened here on the Five-Tyrant Ridge to anyone?" he finally asked.

"Well, others can deny it, but I am stuck. That's what you get for being the host. I simply have no choice but to admit that the Heavenly River Faction had entertained Young Master on the Five-Tyrant Ridge." Huang Boliu let out a few hollow laughs, looking very much embarrassed.

"It's not like that entertaining me with wine is a crime guilty beyond forgiveness. Be a true man, what's this denying nonsense?" Linghu Chong grunted.

“Young Master, it’s not like that,” Huang Boliu smiled apologetically. “Alas, I’ve always been a blockhead. If I had asked my daughter-in-law first, or even my granddaughter, we wouldn’t have offended others and still haven’t gotten a clue. Alas, I married my wife when I was seventeen years old. If it weren’t because my wife was so short-lived and died young, I wouldn’t have been so ignorant of a girl’s concern.”

“No wonder Master always says that these people are heterodox,” Linghu Chong thought. “This man is so incoherent. Just to entertain me with wine, he had to talk to his daughter-in-law and his granddaughter first, then he blames his wife for being too short-lived.”

“Well, what’s done is done. I guess there’s only one way out of this. Young Master, would it be all right if you just say that you knew the Old Huang from before and we have been acquaintances for decades? Wait, that’s not right. Would you please just say that our acquaintance can be traced back to eight or nine years back and that you started drinking and gambling with the Old Huang since you were fifteen or sixteen years old?” Huang Boliu continued.

“Didn’t I gamble and drink with you the year I was six? How could you have forgotten? That’s a total of twenty years of acquaintance,” Linghu Chong grinned.

Huang Boliu was taken by surprise, but it didn’t take him long to realize that Linghu Chong was just been sarcastic.

“That’s of course great if Young Master will say so, but…but twenty years ago I was in the business of raiding homes and plundering houses, things one wouldn’t be very proud of. How could Young Master have made fiends with me? Well…that….” Huang Boliu squeezed out a wry smile.

“Chief Huang, your frankness about it just shows that you are as open as the day. I simply must have made you a friends of mine twenty years ago!” Linghu Chong exclaimed.

“Excellent, excellent! Twenty-year long friends we are!” Huang Boliu was ecstatic. After throwing a quick glance back over his shoulder, he whispered,

“Please take care, Young Master. You have a very kind heart. Even though you are not feeling well at the moment, I am sure your illness can be cured eventually. Besides, the Holy…Holy…is infinitely resourceful…ouch!” With a loud cry, he suddenly turned on his heels and walked off in big strides.

“What holy…holy…infinitely resourceful? This is so bizarre!” Linghu Chong couldn’t help but think.

Sounds of hoof beats became further and further away, and in the end all the noises died down. After staring blankly at the corpse of Ping One-Finger for some moments, Linghu Chong walked out of the shack and immediately found himself thunderstruck. The ridge was entirely deserted by now; there wasn’t even a shadow anywhere, and all it was left was the utter silence that had swept across everything. He had thought that even though the many people had stopped drinking and some were leaving the ridge, they wouldn’t have all left so abruptly.

“Master! Master-Wife!” he called out, raising his voice, but no one answered. “Second apprentice brother! Third apprentice brother! Little apprentice sister!” he called out again, but still no one answered. Other than the crescent moon shining sideways from a corner of the sky, he was the only one atop the spacious, yet breezeless Five-Tyrant Ridge.

Wine kettles, bowls, and plates scattered all over the ground, moreover, many kinds of hats, cloaks, and capes were littered everywhere. Apparently everyone had left so hastily that they didn’t even have a spare moment to collect their belongings.

Feeling completely bewildered, Linghu Chong thought to himself, “They have left in such a hurry, as though some kind of great scourges were coming this way and they had to flee right away. When I first met them, these people all looked as though they feared nothing in this world at all. Why have they suddenly all turned timid? This is so bizarre! And where on earth have Master, Master-Wife, little apprentice sister and the others gone to? If danger is really coming this way, why didn’t anyone warn me?”

Suddenly, a sensation of dreariness and loneliness rolled over him as he moaned at the thought that even though it was a big world he lived in, yet no one really cared about him or his safety. Just moments ago, there had been crowds of people who lined up to make up to him, but now, even the Master and Master-Wife, who had always been on intimate terms with him, had abandoned him, just the same.

A cold, plunging sensation in his stomach soared, which subsequently triggered the energy streams inside him to suddenly surge up. He swayed, and then collapsed to the ground. A few groans escaped him as he struggled to get back onto his feet vainly, feeling completely feeble in all his limbs. Closing his eyes, he rested for a few moments, and then struggled again to try to get up, but this time he tried too hard – everything seemed to have suddenly faded into a complete darkness as a buzzing sound ringed loudly in his ears. Before he knew it, he had fallen unconscious.

Still in a state of wooziness and completely unaware of how long he had been out cold, Linghu Chong heard the soft strokes of a zither echoing in his ears indistinctly. Little by little, he regained his senses, and the elegant and soothing sounds of the zither play also became clearer and clearer, which put his mind at complete ease. The song was none other than the "Song of Peace and Serenity," which the granny at Luoyang had played for him before. As soon as Linghu Chong recognized the music, he felt as though he had been drifting in the boundless ocean for days and had suddenly taken in the glimpse of an island in the near distance. Feeling utterly cheerful, he got back onto his feet.

The sound of the music seemed to have come from within the shack made of straws, so Linghu Chong staggered his way toward the shack. The shack door had been shut, and Linghu Chong stopped about six or seven paces from it, thinking, "The sound of the zither could only mean one thing – the granny from the Bamboo-Green Alley in the Luoyang City must have come. Even back in the Luoyang City, she didn't want me to see her face, how could I just push open the door and enter without her permission?" At that thought, he said with a bow, "Linghu Chong is here to show his respects to the senior master."

The zither made a few tinkling sounds, as though replying to Linghu Chong, and then resumed playing the song. Linghu Chong felt as though the song had carried much comforting and consoling meanings, which gave him ineffable ease. Realizing that after all, there was at least one person who still cared for him, he found himself washed over by the sentiment of gratitude.

"Someone is playing the zither! Those heterodoxy, evil scoundrels haven't all left, yet," a voice suddenly rose from a distance.

"How dare these evil, lewd devils to come to Henan Province and act unruly? Are they stupid enough to think nothing of us?" a resonant voice replied, and after saying these word, he snarled, raising his voice even higher, "What kind of scumbags and slimeballs are you, huh, running wild on the Five-Tyrant Ridge? Give me your names, all of you!" With resourceful inner energy, these words exploded like thunders.

"No wonder Sima Big, Huang Boliu, Zu Qianqiu and the others were scared off at once. There are really master hands from the orthodox schools coming to challenge them," Linghu Chong thought. But deep in his heart, he couldn't help thinking that running away like this was not something a true man would have done. "But if the people coming could have scared away so many people, they had to be senior masters with extraordinary martial arts skills. What if they ask me about it? How would I answer? It's probably better if I don't let them see me."

At that thought, he walked hurriedly behind the shack.

"And in regard of the old granny inside the shack, they probably won't trouble her," he thought to himself.

By then, the zither inside the shack had stopped playing. Sounds of footsteps rose as three men walked onto the ridge. As soon as they arrived at the top of the ridge, all three uttered a cry of surprise. Obviously none of them had expected to see such a silent and empty scene atop the ridge.

"Where did the scoundrels go?" the man with the thunderous voice asked.

"Obviously, after hearing that the two master hands from the Shaolin School

were coming to rid evil, they had all fled, tails between their hind legs," a man in a soft voice answered.

"Don't mention it! I say mostly it had something to do with the prestige of brother Tan of the Kunlun School,[53]" another man said with a big smile, and all three broke into loud laughter.

"I see. So two of them are from the Shaolin School, and the third one is from the Kunlun School," Linghu Chong thought. "The Shaolin School has always been the most reputable school in the Martial World even since the early Tang Dynasty. Just the Shaolin School alone already enjoys a much more renowned name than the entire alliance of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, and their strength perhaps was stronger as well. And furthermore, the Head Master of the Shaolin School, Abbot Fang-Zheng, is well respected by the entire Martial World. As regard to the Kunlun School, Master mentioned many times before that the sword arts of the Kunlun School fly its own colors and have qualities of both power and speed. When these two schools have joined forces, the combined power can be devastating. Most probably they are only vanguards, and more reinforcement are just on their way. But why did Master and Master-Wife have to avoid them?" Then he thought better of it, "I got it. Master is the Head Master of a reputable orthodox school. It would be embarrassing for him to be seen mixed up with people like Huang Boliu who don't have a good reputation."

"Didn't we just hear someone playing the zither a moment ago? Where is that one hiding then? Brother Xin and Brother Yi, there's something odd here," the man named Tan from the Kunlun School spoke again.

"That's right! Brother Tan, you are so attentive. Let's search around and ferret him out," the man with the thunderous voice suggested.

"Senior apprentice brother Xin, I'll check out that shack over there," another voice replied.

From these words, Linghu Chong could tell that the man's surname was Yi, and the man with the thunderous voice had a surname of Xin and was the man's

senior apprentice brother. Then he heard the man named Yin walking toward the shack.

“I am alone by myself. It’s already late at night; it would not have been appropriate manners for a female to greet male visitors,” a clear voice of a female rose from inside the shack.

“She’s a woman,” Xin uttered.

“Was it you who played the zither earlier?” the man named Yi asked.

“That’s right,” the granny answered.

“Why don’t you play a few notes for us?” Yi proposed.

“I did not know you before; how could I play the zither for you, sir?” the granny replied.

“Who cares,” Xin let out a disgruntled snort. “So many excuses. I bet there’s something odd inside the shack. Let’s get in there and find out.”

“What is a woman, alone, doing on the Five-Tyrant Ridge so late at night? Most likely you are of the same kind as those heterodoxy devils. We are coming in for a search,” Yi exclaimed and walked toward the shack door.

“Hold it!” Linghu Chong stepped out from his hiding place and yelled, blocking the entrance to the shack.

Having not expected this at all, the three men were slightly taken aback. But when they saw that it was only a young man, they didn’t care much.

“Who are you, young man? What are you doing hiding so sneakily in the dark?” Xin yelled loudly.

“I am Linghu Chong, an apprentice of the Huashan School. I am here to pay my respects to senior masters of the Shaolin School and the Kunlun School,” Linghu Chong replied, bowing deeply toward the three.

“Oh, you are from the Huashan School. What are you doing here?” Yi let out a snort and inquired.

Linghu Chong glanced at the three men. The man named Xin was not

particularly tall, but his chest protruded out like a drum; no wonder he had such a thunderous voice. Another middle-aged man wore the same type of dark reddish brown long robe; then he had to be the one named Yi from the same school. The man named Tan from the Kunlun School carried a sword on his back. With a loose robe with long sleeves, he dressed with negligent grace.

Instead of waiting for Linghu Chong to answer, Yi asked again, "If you say you are an apprentice of an orthodox school, why are you on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge?"

Ever since Linghu Chong had heard them cursing wildly without a qualm, he had been greatly annoyed. Now when he heard the incivility in the man's tone, he rebuffed, "The three senior masters are also members of the orthodox schools. Aren't you on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge as well?"

"Well said," the man named Tan laughed. "About this zither playing woman in the shack, do you know who she is?"

"She is an elderly granny with eminent virtues who stands aloof from the worldly affairs," Linghu Chong replied.

"Nonsense!" Yi reproved. "Listen to her voice. How can she be that old. What granny rubbish!"

"So this granny has a melodious voice. That's nothing strange! Even her nephew is twenty or thirty years older than you, not mentioning granny herself." Linghu Chong grinned.

"Move aside! We'll go in and take a look, ourselves," Yi demanded, but Linghu Chong stretched his arms and blocked the way.

"Granny has already said it. It's already late at night, and it would not have been appropriate manners for a female to greet male visitors. She doesn't know any of you. Why would she want to see you for no reasons?"

Yi suddenly whisked his sleeve, which sent a stream of force sweeping toward Linghu Chong. Having lost all of his inner strength, Linghu Chong had no way of withstanding the strike. Thump, he collapsed down.

Yi did not expect him to have no inner strength at all, and was taken by quite a surprise. “You say you are an apprentice of the Huashan School? I am afraid you are just blowing your own horn!” he sneered and then walked toward the shack, again.

Linghu Chong stood back up, a scratch mark on his face – apparently from the sharp rocks on the ground.

“Granny does not want to see you. How can you be so insolent? Back in the city of Luoyang, I talked with granny for many days and still didn’t get to see her.”

“Hey chap, watch out for your manners. You’d better move aside, or you’ll only end up with another big fall,” Yi said with a menacing grin.

“The Shaolin School is the most reputable orthodox school in the entire Martial World. The two of you must have been elite laymen masters of the Shaolin School. And this one must have been a renowned master of the Kunlun School. But bullying an elderly granny late at night? Aren’t you afraid to become the laughing stock for the entire Martial World?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Where do you find so much rubbish?” Yi bellowed. Suddenly, he shot his left hand out and with a loud smack, slapped Linghu Chong heavily in the left cheek.

Although Linghu Chong had lost all of his inner strength, seeing Yi lowing his right shoulder slightly, he knew immediately that Yi was going to strike him with his left hand. He wanted to dodge out of the way hurriedly, except that his body did not comply, and the strike landed on his face, solid and square. The force sent his body spinning and he fell down once again.

“Junior apprentice brother Yi, this man doesn’t know martial arts. There’s no need to lower yourself to the same level as him. Those evil devils have all ran away. Let’s go!” the man named Xin proposed.

“All the heterodoxy evil devils in the Shandong Province and the Henan Province congregated on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge all of a sudden, and then dispersed into nowhere so abruptly. The congregation was strange, and the

dispersion was also peculiar. We must get to the bottom of it. I think there's a good chance we'll be able to find some clues inside that shack," Yi replied.

Linghu Chong stood up again, a sword now emerging in his grip.

"Senior master Yi, I owe this granny in the shack great favor. As long as I am still breathing, I won't let you offend her," he declared firmly.

"With what? Just with the sword in your hand?" Yi burst into loud laughter sarcastically.

"I am a junior with only insignificant skills. How can I ever be a match for an elite fighter of the Shaolin School? However, nothing can weigh more than righteous reasons. If you want to enter the shack, you'll have to kill me first," Linghu Chong replied with dignity.

"Junior apprentice brother Yi, this chap certainly has moral integrity. Why don't we have it his way and just let it go?" Xin urged.

'I heard that the sword arts of your Huashan School are rather original, and there's also the break up of the Sword-Branch and the Qi-Branch. Now, do you belong to the Sword-Branch, or the Qi-Branch, or, rather, the Fart-Branch? Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" Yi grinned an evil grin and then broke into a loud laughter. At the sound of his laughter, Xin and Tan also joined him and laughed out loud.

"Use one's strength to bully the weak, what kind of reputable orthodox schools are you? Did you say that you were members of the Shaolin School? You probably are only boasting!" Linghu Chong spoke again, loud and clear.

Exasperated, Yi raised his right hand and was ready to strike it toward Linghu Chong's chest. If this strike got launched, for sure Linghu Chong would be killed on the spot.

"Hold it!" Xin stopped Yi from striking out. "Linghu Chong, are you saying that apprentices of a reputable orthodox school can not fight the others?"

"Apprentices of a reputable orthodox school always have legit reasons behind each fight," Linghu Chong answered.

Yi stretched his palm out slowly. "I'll count one, two, three. By the time I

count to three, if you still don't move aside, I'll break three ribs of yours. One!"

"Breaking three ribs of mine? That's nothing!" Linghu Chong let out a slight smile.

"Two!" Yi counted loudly.

"Little friend, this junior apprentice of mine really put words into deeds. I think you'd better move aside quickly," Xin suggested.

"But words coming out of my mouth also count. Linghu Chong is not dead, yet. How can I let you insult the granny?" Linghu Chong replied with a smile.

After these words, Linghu Chong knew that Yi's palm strike would be soon coming. Taking a deep breath secretly, he put all his strength onto his right arm. But the effort immediately brought a violent pain to his chest as thousands of imaginary golden stars started flickering wildly in front of his eyes.

"Three!" Yi snarled and took a step forward with his left foot. Seeing that Linghu Chong had his back leaning against the door plank of the shack, a sneer brewing on the corner of his mouth, having no intention to move aside, Yi struck out with his right palm.

Linghu Chong almost suffocated when the force carried by the strike reached him. He pushed his long sword out, the tip of his sword pointing at the middle of Yi's palm. The positioning and the timing of the push were simply brilliant! Yi's palm strike was already fully executed and it was already too late for him to withdraw the strike. A light dull sound and a loud cry of pain echoed as the tip of the long sword penetrated the middle of Yi's palm. Pulling his palm backward hastily, with another dull sound, he had drawn his hand off the sword tip, but the damage was done. He had inflicted a severe injury. Leaping back dozens of feet, he drew his long sword by his waist with a mixed feeling of shock and fury.

"The damn chap was only acting dumb. So you actually have outstanding Kung Fu. I…I'll fight you to the end!" he growled.

Xin, Yi, and Tan, all three of them, were experts in sword arts. Seeing that

when Linghu Chong pushed his sword put, he wasn't using any move, and only with his control of the positioning and timing of his sword, he had managed to have his opponent sending his palm onto the tip of the sword of his own accord. His attainments in sword arts had truly reached the highest stage of the realm.

Although Yi was infuriated, he dared not to underestimate Linghu Chong. Holding the long sword in his left hands, he shot out three quick thrusts, all of which were fake attacks to test the opponent. Each of the thrusts only went half way before he drew the sword back.

That night when Linghu Chong had blinded fifteen elite fighters outside of the Buddha of Herb Monastery, even though he had already lost all his inner strength by then, he had still been in a much better shape compared to now. The several ordeals since then had really done him in. By now he almost felt incapable of raising his sword. Seeing the three fake attacks from Yi and how the sword tip vibrated continuously, he knew those must have been superior sword moves of the Shaolin School, which only made him more reluctant of making Yi an enemy.

"I intend absolutely no offense to three senior masters. If the three of you would walk away, I…I will apologize most sincerely."

"It's too late to beg for mercy now!" Yi grunted. Thrusting his sword forward in lightning speed, he shot the sword tip toward Linghu Chong's throat.

Linghu Chong knew too well that with his current weak physical condition, there was not a chance that he would be able to dodge out of this attack. Having no alternatives, he also thrust his sword forward. Even though his thrust was launched after Yi's thrust, it reached the target earlier. With a thud, the tip of his sword struck Yi on the vital acupoint on his left wrist. Yi opened his palm in pain, and his long sword fell to the ground.

By then, the light of dawn had already appeared from the east. Staring at the drops of blood rolling down his left wrist and then dripping down to the ground, Yi couldn't even believe his eyes. After a long while, he heaved a deep

sigh, turned around, and strode away. The man named Xin never wanted to become enemies of the Huashan School to start with. Now after he witnessed this brilliant and unsurpassed thrust Linghu Chong had just put on display, he knew he wouldn't even stand a chance fighting Linghu Chong. Concerned about his apprentice brother's injury, he called out, "Apprentice brother Yi," and then ran after Yi.

"Are you really an apprentice of the Huashan Sword School?" the man named Tan finally asked after gazing at Linghu Chong for a good while.

"Yes, I am!" Linghu Chong answered as he struggled to maintain his balance on the verge of a total collapse.

Tan could tell that Linghu Chong was suffering from very serious internal injuries. Even though Linghu Chong had showed outstanding sword skills, all he had to do was to wait a few moments more. He didn't even have to attach, and Linghu Chong would just collapse on his own.

"One injured and one scared away, both elite fighters from the Shaolin School suffered setbacks because of this young man from the Huashan School. If I can knock him down and then seize him, bringing him to the Shaolin Temple, not only would I have done the Shaolin School a great favor, our Kunlun School would also look real good in the central region of the Martial World," Tan thought inwardly as he took a step forward and then said with a smile.

"Young man, you sword skills are not too shabby at all. How about a contest in the realm of palm and hand techniques between the two of us? What do you say?"

Just a glance at Tan's face had given Linghu Chong enough idea about what Tan had in his mind. "This man is so deceitful. He is even more detestable than that Yi from the Shaolin School," he couldn't help but think. Raising his sword, he stabbed it out toward Tan's shoulder, but his strength drained out of him so quickly that the stab only traveled halfway before he lost the grip of the sword. "Clank!" His sword fell to the ground.

Tan was almost ecstatic. Wasting no time, he struck out with a powerful palm

strike, and the strike landed heavily on Linghu Chong's chest. Linghu Chong's body jerked back violently as blood spurted out from mouth. There was only a short space between the two, and the spurt of blood splashed all over Tan's face, leaving even a few drops inside his mouth. Tan felt the taste of blood inside his mouth, but he didn't pay much attention to it, and raised his right palm, ready for another palm strike, deeply afraid that Linghu Chong might pick up his sword and launch a counterattack. But suddenly he felt great dizziness, and before he knew it, he had dropped to the ground.

Seeing that Tan had suddenly fainted when he, himself, was at his last gasp, Linghu Chong was taken by total surprise. But at the meanwhile, he couldn't help feeling very lucky. Tan's face now showed a shade of dark color, and the muscle on his face twisted and twitched, making his face looking utterly strange and horrible.

"You have only yourself to blame for not initializing your inner strength properly!" Linghu Chong muttered.

He looked around him in all directions. It was indeed a very strange scene. There was not another person on the Five-Tyrant Ridge. The only sound was the chirping from the many birds on treetops, and the only things left were the many wine kettles, bowls, and dish plates, which scattered all over the place.

"Granny, how have you been these days?" after wiping the blood off his lips with his sleeves, he asked.

"Young Master, you are too fatigued right now. Please sit down and take a rest," the granny replied.

Linghu Chong was truly exhausted by now. Hearing the granny's words, he sat down to the ground. The zither music rose gently in the shack once again. It almost felt like a stream of clear spring, which had washed over his entire body, and then flew through him. Linghu Chong felt as though his body had become lighter and lighter, and had floated on top of the white clouds that felt like cotton wool. After a long time, the sound of the zither became lower and lower, until eventually it was so dim that it was barely audible.

Linghu Chong felt much rejuvenated. Getting back onto his feet, he bowed deeply.

"Many thanks, Granny. I have benefited a great deal from your kind music."

"You risked your life to repel powerful enemies, saving me from being humiliated by rascals. It is I who feel thankful for you," the granny replied.

"Don't mention it. I was only doing the right thing."

The granny fell silent, and a few tender sounds from the zither echoed, as though the granny was plucking the strings of the zither randomly while wavering upon something in her mind. After a while, she asked.

"Where…where are you going now?"

Feeling of desolation welled up in Linghu Chong's heart, which almost choked him and made him cough uncontrollably for a good while. It just seemed that there was not a place between heaven and earth he could shelter himself.

"I…I have nowhere to go," after finally catching his breath, Linghu Chong murmured.

"Aren't you going to look for your Master and Master-Wife? How about your apprentice brothers and apprentice…sister?"

"Them…I don't know where they went. With my injury, the chance of finding them is too slim. Besides, even if I do find them, alas!" Linghu Chong heaved a deep sigh, thinking, "Even if I do find them, so what? They don't want me now."

"You injury is very severe. Why don't you visit some beautiful scenery to relieve boredom? Wouldn't that be better than feeling miserable in vain?"

"Granny, you are right!" Linghu Chong let out a few laughs. "I never really cared much about life and death to begin with. Farewell for now! I guess I'll be strolling about for some fun!"

After bowing toward the shack one more time, Linghu Chong turned around

and walked away. But only after three steps, he heard the granny's voice again.

"Are you…are you leaving already?"

"Yes." Linghu Chong halted his steps.

"But you have severe injuries. If you travel by yourself, there will be no one to tend upon you along the trip. That won't be appropriate."

Sensing the caring and concern in the granny's words, Linghu Chong felt another surge of warmth in his heart.

"Thank you, granny, for your kind concern. My injury is incurable. It's really no difference whether I die earlier or later, here or there."

"Hmm, I see. But…but…" the granny paused for quite a while before finishing her sentence, "what if those two rascals from the Shaolin School come back to cause more trouble? What should I do? And that Tan Diren from the Kunlun School is only unconscious temporarily. Once he wakes up, I am afraid he'll trouble me more."

"Granny, where are you going? Why don't I escort you for a stage of the journey?" Linghu Chong suggested.

"That would have been great, except that there's a big difficulty involved. I am afraid that it will trouble you a great deal," the granny answered.

"Granny, you saved my life. It's no trouble at all."

The granny heaved a sigh and then said, "A very formidable enemy of mine came to the Bamboo-Green Alley to give me trouble, that's why I have come here to hide. But I am sure he would trace me down in no time. Your injury has not recovered and won't be able to fight him. I only want to find a secluded place to hide from him temporarily, so I can wait till all my helps arrive before settling accounts with him. If I ask you to escort me, then firstly, you are injured, and secondly, wouldn't it bore you to death for such an active and lively young man to accompany such an old granny?"

Linghu Chong burst into loud laughter.

“Is that it? That’s a piece of cake. Where are you headed? I’ll go with you. Even if it’s the end of the earth, as long as I am not dead, I’ll accompany you there.”

“I’ll be troubling you then. Are you serious that even if it’s the end of the earth, you’ll still accompany me there?” the granny asked, her voice filled with joy.

“That’s right! Even if it’s the end of the earth, Linghu Chong will accompany Granny there,” Linghu Chong promised.

“But there’s another difficulty here,” the granny added.

“What is that?” Linghu Chong asked.

“My face is very ugly. Anyone seeing my face will be very much frightened. Therefore I do not wish anyone to see my face. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have objected those three men when they wanted to enter the shack to see me. You must promise me that under any circumstance, you will never cast a look at me. You can’t look at my face, my body, my hands, my feet, or even my clothes.”

“I am grateful that Granny cared for me and I respect Granny very much. What has Granny’s appearance has anything to do with it?” Linghu Chong replied.

“If you can’t promise that, please leave now.”

“Fine, fine! I promise. I promise that I’ll never cast a look at you under any circumstances,” Linghu Chong agreed hurriedly.

“You can’t even cast a look at my back,” the granny added.

“Could your back have been utterly ugly as well?” Linghu Chong thought to himself. “The ugliest back had to be from a midget, or a hunchback. But even those are no big deal. It’s not gonna be easy if I can’t even look at your back throughout such a long journey.”

“You can’t do it?” the granny asked, sensing Linghu Chong’s hesitation.

“I can. I can. If I cast even one look at Granny, I’ll cut my own eyes out,”

Linghu Chong answered.

"You'd better remember that. You go first. I'll follow behind you."

"Sure!" Linghu Chong answered and then began taking the path down the ridge. Sounds of footsteps rose behind him. The granny followed.

After walking for a few dozen of feet, the granny handed Linghu Chong a branch from behind.

"You can use this branch as your crutch."

"Okay," Linghu Chong answered.

Using the branch as a crutch to support himself, he walked down the ridge slowly. After some more walking, he suddenly remembered something.

"Granny, you know that name of that Tan from the Kunlun School?" he asked.

"Oh, that Tan Diren is a good hand amount the second generation of apprentices in the Kunlun School. He mastered about sixty to seventy percent of his Master's sword skills. But compared to his big apprentice brother and second apprentice brother, he is still far behind. That big fellow Xin Guoliang from the Shaolin School has better sword skills than him."

"So that man with a loud voice is named Xin Guoliang. He seemed to be reasonable."

"His junior apprentice brother's name is Yi Guozi. That one was a total jerk. Those two thrusts of yours, one penetrating his palm, the other one injuring his left wrist, were quite handsome."

"I had no choice. Alas, now I've started a feud with the Shaolin School. That can only bring endless of future trouble."

"What about the Shaolin School? There's a good chance we can beat them. I didn't expect that Tan Diren would hit you with a palm strike, and I had no idea that you would spurt blood."

"Granny, you saw everything? I wonder why that Tan Diren suddenly passed out cold."

“Didn’t you know? Blue Phoenix and the four Miao Girls under her command gave you a lot of blood. They are around venomous pests days and nights, so naturally their blood contained poison. Besides, the Five-Sylph Wine is utmost toxic. When your poisonous blood splashed into his mouth, of course he could not stand it.”

“Oh!” Linghu Chong finally understood. “How could I stand it, then? How odd! I never had any grudges against that Chief Blue. I wonder why she would want to harm me.”

“Who said she wanted to harm you? She had all good intentions, humph, wishful thinking, wanting to cure your injury and all. To poison your blood yet preserve your life is the trick her Five-Sylph Sect is really good at.”

“I see. I thought that Chief Blue had no ill wills toward me. Doctor Ping One-Finger said that her medicinal wine was the utmost tonic.”

“Of course she had no ill wills toward you. She couldn’t have had more good wills,” the granny exclaimed, which was returned by a smile on Linghu Chong’s face.

“Do you think that Tan Diren will survive it?”

“That depends on his own internal strength and how much poisonous blood splashed into his mouth.”

Remembering the expression on Tan Diren’s face after he was poisoned, Linghu Chong couldn’t help but shiver. After walking another hundred of feet, he suddenly remembered another thing and shouted out immediately.

“Oops, Granny, will you please wait here for me? I need to get back onto the ridge.”

“Why?” the granny asked.

“The remains of Doctor Ping’s body is still on the ridge and have not been buries yet.”

“No need to go back. I’ve already handled his body.”

“Oh, so Granny has already given Doctor Ping a burial.”

“Nah, it wasn’t a burial. I dissolved his body using dissolvent powder. Did you expect me to stare at a dead corpse all night long? Ping One-Finger didn’t look that great when he was still alive. After he turned into a corpse, you can imagine how he looked.”

Linghu Chong answered with a snort, but he couldn’t help thinking that the granny’s behavior was beyond all expectations. He owed Ping One-Finger great favor, and after Ping One-Finger passed away, he should have given him a proper burial, but this Granny opted to dissolve the body using dissolvent powder. The more he thought about this, the more uneasy he became, but as to why it was wrong to dissolve the body using dissolvent powder, he could not say.

After the both of them traveled for over a mile, they had arrived at the plain at the foot of the ridge.

“Open your palm!” the granny demanded.

“Okay!” Linghu Chong answered, feeling surprised, wondering what kind of trick she was going to play this time. He opened his palm as directed, and then with a small pop, a small object was thrown from behind his back and fell right in the middle of his palm. It was a yellow pill about the size of one’s little finger.

“Swallow it and then take a rest under that big tree,” the granny directed.

“Sure!” Linghu Chong answered and then swallowed the pill down his throat.

“I gave you medicine to extend your life only because I rely on your brilliant sword skills for a safe journey, so you won’t suddenly die on me and make me lose my escort. It’s not because I have any good intentions for…for you, much less an attempt to save your life. You’d better remember that,” the granny exclaimed.

Linghu Chong acknowledged with a snort. Walking by the tree he sat down, leaning against the trunk of the tree, when a stream of warmth rose up from his lower abdomen and then flowed into the many passages and channels inside his

body. It felt as though the stream of warmth also carried much energy and rejuvenated all his internal organs and arteries.

"This pill obviously is of great benefit for me, but the granny just wouldn't admit that she cared for me, and kept saying that she was only taking advantage of me. There are only people who deny everything once they took advantage of others. Why does she speak the opposite?" Linghu Chong pondered. "And when she threw the pill into my palm, the pill did not even bounce. Apparently she threw it with a sinking force, which could only have been executed with very high-level inner energy. Her Kung Fu skills are much higher than mine. She doesn't need me to protect her. Well, if this is what she wants, I'll just comply."

"Granny, are you tired? Let's go now," after a brief rest, Linghu Chong stood up and said.

"I am tired. I need a bit more rest," the granny answered.

"Okay," Linghu Chong replied as he thought to himself, "For elder people, despite how excellent their Kung Fu skills might be, they still lack the level of vigor a youth possesses. I really should have shown more solicitude for the granny instead of only thinking about myself." At that thought, he sat back down.

"Let's go," the granny finally said after a long while.

Linghu Chong answered with a nod, and then walked at the front while the granny followed him behind. The pill certainly made a great difference. Linghu Chong found himself walking at a brisk pace. Following the granny's instructions, he always picked desolated mountain trails. After a few miles of walking, the mountain trail gradually turned more and more rugged and rough, which made Linghu Chong breath more heavily.

"I am tired. I need to take a break," the granny suddenly announced.

"Sure," Linghu Chong responded and then sat down on the ground, thinking to himself, "Her breathing is still deep and calm. She can't be tired at all. She obviously wants me to take a break, but would rather claim that she was the one tired."

After resting for about ten minutes, the two set out walking again. After turning a mountain ridge, they suddenly heard a loud voice talking.

“Everybody hurry up with your meal. We need to get out of here as soon as possible. This place is apt to get into trouble,” the voice exclaimed, which was answered by dozens of people all together.

Linghu Chong paused his steps and glanced over, then saw dozens of men sitting in a circle eating their food on a stretch of meadow by the mountain stream. By then, these men had also spotted Linghu Chong and someone had already shouted out.

“It’s Young Master Linghu!”

Linghu Chong vaguely remembered seeing them on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge the night before. Just when he was about to shout his greetings, suddenly, the dozens of men all froze and goggled toward the direction behind his back in dead silence, their faces looking totally awkward. Some looked terrified, while some others looked perplexed and alarmed, as though they had suddenly encountered something so inexpressibly peculiar, something they did not know how to deal with.

As soon as Linghu Chong saw the bizarre scene, he wanted to look back over his shoulder to find out what on earth had happened behind him that would have turned the dozens of people into clay idols and wooden dummies, but he suddenly realized: these people only reacted like this because they saw the Granny behind him, and he had promised the granny that he would never cast a look at her. At that thought, he hurriedly jerked his head to look forward again. The strength he put in was so overwhelming that his neck muscle ached because of it. But meanwhile, his curiosity soared.

“Why are they so terrified at the sight of the granny? Could the granny have really been so gruesome looking that it makes her totally out of this world?” he couldn’t help but think.

Suddenly, a man raised the dagger he had been using to slice meat and stabbed toward his two eyes. Instantly, blood gushed out of his eye sockets.

“What are you doing?” astonished, Linghu Chong shouted out.

“I lost my eyes three days ago, and have not been able to see anything ever since,” the man exclaimed loudly.

Within seconds, another two men also drew their short knives and blinded themselves with a few quick stabs. “We’ve been blind for ages. We could not see a thing,” they also exclaimed.

Linghu Chong was dumbstruck. Seeing that the rest men in the group also each drew out their daggers and awls and were about to blind themselves just the same, he yelled out hastily.

“Hey! Hey! Hold it! Let’s talk it over. Don’t hurt yourselves. Why…why do you do that?”

“I was going to swear an oath that I’ll never dare talk about it, but I am afraid that it would not be convincing,” a man answered in a saddened voice.

“Granny, please do something. Ask them to stop blinding themselves, will you?” Linghu Chong shouted.

“Very well, I trust you. There’s an island called Twine-Dragon Island in the East Sea. Has any of you heard of it before?” the granny asked.

“There’s an island called Twine-Dragon Island about two hundred miles from the Quanzhou City in Fujian. I heard that it’s an untraversed and desolated island,” an old man answered.

“That’s the one. Why don’t you set out right away to have some fun on the Twine-Dragon Island? There’s no need for you to ever come back to the central region again,” the granny said.

“We’ll set out right away!” the dozens of men answered in unison, all looking very pleased.

“We’ll never speak to anybody else on our way there,” someone added.

“Whether you speak or not, what has that gotten anything to do with me?” the granny spoke in a chilling tone.

“Right! Right! I was just talking rubbish,” the man answered immediately, and raising his hands high, he began slapping his own face.

“Go now!” the granny ordered.

At the command, the dozens of men broke into a gallop. The tree blind fellows, helped by the arm by their fellow companions, also walked away in strides. Within moments, all of them had vanished from sight.

Linghu Chong gasped with astonishment. “Just a few words from the granny have banished all those people to a desolate island in the East Sea, with no hope of returning within this life, yet all these people appeared highly delighted at the punishment as though they have just received their pardoned. This is just so inconceivable.”

He walked on silently, many thoughts surging in his mind, thinking that the granny following behind him had to be the most eccentric oddball he had ever seen.

“I just hope we won’t walk into more friends from the Five-Tyrant Ridge along our way,” Linghu Chong thought to himself. “They all came warmheartedly for curing my injury. If by any chance they bump into the granny, then either they had to blind themselves, or be banished to some barren island in the sea. That would certainly not be worthwhile. It looks as if the reason why Chief Huang, Chieftain Sima, and Zu Qianqiu asked me to pretend that I had never met them, and the reason why the many people on the Five-Tyrant Ridge dispersed all of a sudden, were all because of this granny. They were scared of this granny. So what…what kind of horrible monster is she?” At that thought, he couldn’t help but shiver.

After they had walked another three or four miles, a voice suddenly shouted a distance away behind them, “That’s Linghu Chong over there.” The voice was extremely loud and thunderous. Linghu Chong didn’t even have to guess whose voice that had belonged to – Xin Guoliang from the Shaolin School.

“I don’t want to see him. You muddle with him,” the granny declared.

“All right,” Linghu Chong answered as the scrubs by his side rustled. The

granny had hidden herself among the bushes.

“Uncle-Master, that Linghu Chong is wounded. He can’t walk very fast,” Xin Guoliang’s voice rose again.

There was actually still quite a distance between them, but because Xin Guoliang’s voice was simply too loud, even just a casual remark from him would make its way into Linghu Chong’s ears clearly.

“So he came with his Uncle-Master,” Linghu Chong thought. Since they’ve already seen him, he decided to just sit by the side of the path and wait for them.

After a short while, sounds of footsteps echoed as several men walked along the path in quick strides. Xin Guoliang and Yi Guozi were both among the group. There were also two monks and a middle-aged man. One of the monks was a very old man with many wrinkles across his face. The other monk was about thirty years of age and held a Buddhist’s Spade in his hand.

Linghu Chong stood up and then bowed down deeply.

“Linghu Chong, a junior of the Huashan School here shows his respects to the many senior masters of the Shaolin School. May I have the honor to hear senior masters’ names?” he greeted.

“Chap…” Yi Guozi yelled but interrupted by the old monk.

“Old monk’s Buddhist’s name is Fang-Sheng,” the old monk replied.

As soon as the old monk spoke out, Yi Guozi held his tongue, but the glooming expression on his face clearly showed that he was still infuriated about the setback he suffered moments back.

“I pay my respects to the Great Master!” Linghu Chong put his palms together and bowed.

“Young Hero, please don’t be over-courteous. How is your respectful master Mr. Yue?” Fang-Sheng nodded and then spoke with a kind and pleasant countenance.

At first, when Linghu Chong heard the group bearing down after him so

menacingly, he was alarmed and on tenterhooks. After seeing Monk Fang-Sheng speaking and behaving with the demeanor of a sensible and accomplished monk, also knowing that monks of the "Fang" generation were the most senior ones in the Shaolin Temple as apprentice brothers of the temple abbot, Great Master Fang-Zheng, he reckoned that Monk Fang-Sheng was not someone who persisted unreasonably like that Yi Guozi and felt some relief at once.

"Thank you for asking, Great Master! My Master is well and sound," he answered respectfully.

"These four are all my Nephew-Apprentices. This monk's Buddhist's name is Jue-Yue, this is Nephew-Apprentice Huang Guobo, this is Nephew-Apprentice Xin Guoliang, and that's Nephew-Apprentice Yi Guozi. I believe you have met Xin and Yi before," Fang-Sheng introduced.

"Ah, yes! Linghu Chong here shows his respects to four senior masters. I have severe wounds and cannot move about freely. If there's any lack of manners on my side, I beg for senior masters' pardon." Linghu Chong cupped his hands.

"You have severe wounds?" Yi Guozi let out a disgruntled snort.

"Do you really have severe wounds? Guozi, was it you who wounded him?" Fang-Sheng asked.

"It was just a misunderstanding. There's nothing to it. Senior master Yi threw me to the ground with a brush of his sleeve and then hit me with a palm strike also. But don't worry. I can probably still hang on to my life for a short while. Great Master, you don't need to reproach senior master Yi," Linghu Chong said.

He intentionally mentioned about his severe wounds at the very beginning, and also blamed it all on Yi Guozi, thinking that Fang-Sheng, the capable and senior monk, would certainly not allow those four Nephew-Apprentices of his to make trouble for him again.

"Senior master Xin saw everything with his own eyes on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge," he continued. "But since Great Master has come yourself. That's a great favor for a junior like me. I promise you that I'll never mentioned this incident in front of my Master. You can rest assured, Great Master, that even

though my wounds are incurable, this incident will not stir up any dispute between the Five Mountains Sword Alliance and the Shaolin School."

With these words, it sounded as though it was all Yi Guozi's fault that he had suffered severe and incurable injuries.

"That…that…that's total nonsense! You were severely injured all along. What have I gotten anything to do with it?" Yi Guozi snarled.

"Well, senior master Yi, I don't think it's a good idea to mention that to anybody. If the story gets out, wouldn't that have stained the clean fame of the Shaolin School?" Linghu Chong let out a gentle sigh and then said quietly.

Xin Guoliang, Huang Guobo, and Jue-Yue all nodded slightly, fully understanding what Linghu Chong had meant. The "Fang" generation monks of the Shaolin School had extreme seniority in the Martial World. Although the Shaolin School is a separate school from the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, when ranked by seniority, they would have equated to masters one generation above the Head Masters of each of the Five Mountains sword schools. Therefore, Xin Guoliang and Yi Guozi's seniority would also be one generation above Linghu Chong. When Yi Guozi had fought Linghu Chong, one could have already called that a senior bullies a junior, not mentioning that the Shaolin School had two masters at the scene, and on top of that, Linghu Chong had already been severely injured before the fight. The Shaolin School had very strict school rules. If Yi Guozi had really slain a junior from the Huashan School, the punishment could have been as severe as the capital punishment to pay with his life. At least, he would have been stripped off all his Kung Fu skills and be expelled from the school. When Yi Guozi thought of the consequences, his face whitened from fear.

"Young hero, please come closer. Let me take a look at your wounds," Fang-Sheng proposed.

Linghu Chong stepped closer. Fang-Sheng reached out with his right hand and then gripped Linghu Chong's wrist. As soon as he placed his fingers on the "Da-Yuan" and the "Jing-Qu" acupoints on Linghu Chong's wrist, he felt a stream of

peculiar inner energy inside Linghu Chong's body, which gave his fingers a violent jolt and made them slip off the acupoints. Fang-Sheng felt a shock in his heart. He was one of the few top fighters among the highest generation of Shaolin monks. It was simply unimaginably queer that the inner energy inside the young man was powerful enough to jolt away his fingers. How could he have known that there were inner energy streams from the Peach Valley's Six Fairies and Monk No Commandment inside Linghu Chong's body? Although he had top notch Kung Fu, himself, when caught off guard, he still could not stand the combined force from those seven elite fighters. He couldn't help but utter a light cry of surprise. Fixed his stare on Linghu Chong's eyes, he spoke slowly.

"Young hero, you are not from the Huashan School."

"I am really an apprentice of the Huashan School. I was the first apprentice my master Mr. Yue ever took in," Linghu Chong replied.

"Then why did you learn the heretical Kung Fu from heterodoxy people afterwards?" Fang-Sheng requested.

"Uncle-Master, this chap is without a doubt using heterodoxy Kung Fu. There's no point denying it. Didn't we see a woman follow behind him just now? Where is she hiding now? I bet she is no good egg, acting so clandestine and all!" Yi Guozi cut in.

"You are a member of a renowned school. How can you be so out of manners?" hearing Yi Guozi insulting the granny, Linghu Chong yelled angrily. "Granny just doesn't want to see you so as not to get angry over you."

"You tell her to come out. Whether she is good or evil, my Uncle-Master can tell with his sharp eyes," Yi Guozi dared him.

"Our dispute started because you were disrespectful to my granny. Haven't you spoken enough nonsense?" Linghu Chong rebuffed.

"Young hero Linghu," Jue-Yue joined in, "earlier when I looked by the hill, I could see that the woman following behind you walked in very nimble steps, and didn't seem to be an aged woman."

“Granny is a member of the Martial World. It’s only natural that she had nimble steps. What’s so odd about that?” Linghu Chong disagreed.

“Jue-Yue, we are members of the Buddha’s order. How can we insist on seeing the elder, female member of other people?” Fang-Sheng reproved. Turning toward Linghu Chong, he said, “Young hero Linghu, there are many doubtful points in this matter that I could not figure out. You are indeed severely wounded. But your internal wounds are completely out of the ordinary. It could not have been my Nephew-Apprentice Yi who had caused the injuries. It is fate that has brought us here together today. I wish you a speedy recovery. Farewell for now. Your internal injury is very serious. I have two pills here that you can take. But I am afraid they won’t cure….” Fang-Sheng reached into his chest pocket.

Linghu Chong felt his admiration soar in his heart. “An accomplished monk from Shaolin shows extraordinary bearings indeed,” he thought to himself. Bowing toward Fang-Sheng, he said, “It is so fortunate that I can meet Great Master….”

Before he had a chance to finish his words, suddenly a loud ring echoed and Yi Guozi had unsheathed his sword.

“Here she is!” Yi shouted excitedly and then dived into the bush where the granny had been hiding, sword first.

“Nephew-Apprentice Yi, don’t be rude!” Fang-Sheng shouted.

With a loud whoosh, Yi Guozi had flown back out from the bush and after gliding tens of feet in the air. Smack, he dropped to the ground like a log, facing upwards. His arms and legs twitched a few times and then he became still.

Fang-Sheng and the rest of the people were astounded. A hole had appeared on Yi’s forehead, from which blood gushed out. He still held a tight grip of the long sword in his hand, but he had already stopped breathing.

Xin Guoliang, Huang Guobo, and Jue-Yue roared in unison. Each gripping his weapon tightly they made at the bush in fury. Fang-Sheng extended his arms to his sides, and as the loose sleeves of the monk’s robe spread open, a powerful

yet soft stream of energy force blocked the three men like an invisible wall.

"May I ask which friend from the Dark-Wood Cliff has come here?" turning toward the bush Fang-Sheng asked gravely, his voice loud and clear. But only silence followed, complete silence, which swept all over the hundreds of shrubs and bushes.

"Our school never had any imbroglio with the Dark-Wood Cliff. Why have you slain Nephew-Apprentice Yi with such murderous scheme?" he asked again, but still, no one responded from within the bushes.

"The Dark-Wood Cliff? The Dark-Wood Cliff is where the Demon's Cult is headquartered. Could…could this granny have been a senior member of the Demon's Cult?" Linghu Chong was thunderstruck.

"I've had the chance to make acquaintance with Chief Dongfang once many years ago. Friend, now that you have committed the murder, we must settle the discord once for all. Why don't you show yourself?" Fang-Sheng urged.

"Chief Dongfang? Is he talking about the chief of the Demon's Cult, Dongfang Invincible? That man was known as the number one fighter in the entire world. Then…then this granny really is a member of the Demon's Cult." Linghu Chong felt another shock shooting up his spine.

But the granny stayed behind the bushes and would not respond.

"Friend, if you insist on not showing yourself, please excuse the old monk's discourtesy then!" Fang-Sheng exclaimed as he retracted his arms slightly, and immediately, energy soared inside his two sleeves, inflating them like two large balloons. He pushed his arms forward and the powerful force shot out from his palms. A loud crack exploded in the air as the dozens of scrubs all broke from the middle and small branches and leaves swirled in the midair. Right at that moment, a shadow leapt out from the remains of the bushes.

Even though Linghu Chong really wanted to take a look at the granny's appearance, he still remembered the promised he had made and quickly turned his back to it. He could hear the roaring and bellowing from Xin Guoliang and Jue-Yue, together with the sounds of weapons clashing with each other, so

dense and so speedy that it sounded as though the raindrops from a thunderstorm bouncing off the window. Apparently the granny had already engaged in the right with Fang-Sheng and his group.

It was about 10 o'clock in the morning, and the sun hung in a corner of the sky, casting rays of sunshine down from an angle. Although Linghu Chong found himself tormented by anxiety and curiosity, in order to keep his promise, he dared not turn his head around to glance at the fight, and only looked down at the ground where dark shadows cast by the five fighters fluttered wildly. Fang-Sheng and his three Nephew-Apprentices had surrounded the granny. Fang-Sheng was not holding any weapon in his hands; Jue-Yue was using a Buddhist's Spade; Huang Guobo used a knife; Xin Guoliang wielded a long sword. The granny had a pair of very short weapons in her hands. They looked like daggers, yet also assembled the shapes of Emei Stings. The weapons were short and thin, and almost looked as though they were transparent. Looking only based on the shadow from the sun Linghu Chong could not make out what kind of weapons they were. The granny and Fang-Sheng both fought quietly, whereas Xin Guoliang and the rest two all bellowed at the top of their lungs, which seemed to have made their attacks more menacing.

"Can't we talk this over? This is outrageous, four guys attacking an elderly granny at the same time!" Linghu Chong protested.

"An elderly granny? Ha-ha, this chap must be daydreaming. She…" Huang Guobo scoffed when Fang-Sheng suddenly shouted to him, "Huang…watch out!"

Huang suddenly uttered a painful cry. Evidently he had just taken a hard hit.

Linghu Chong was almost struck dumb with amazement. "This granny's Kung Fu must have been terrific!" he thought. "Earlier when Great Master Fang-Sheng broke those scrubs with shear energy force, he showed astonishing inner strength. But this granny is still able to get the upper hand one against four!"

Suddenly, Jue-Yue also cried loudly in pain. The Buddhist's Spade flew out of his grip, over Linghu Chong's head, and then fell to the ground dozens of feet

away. By then, there were only three fluttering shadows on the ground. Both Huang Guobo and Jue-Yue had collapsed, and it was only Fang-Sheng and Xin Guoliang still left in the fight against the granny.

"What a sin! What a sin! You are too ruthless, killing my three Nephew-Apprentices one after another. I can no longer hold my hands. You give me no choice but to do everything in my power to contend with you," Fang-Sheng exclaimed.

Loud clapping sounds followed. It appears that Great Master had wielded his weapon, which seems to have fallen under the category of a wooden club or staff. Linghu Chong only felt the turbulence of energy behind his back became swifter and fiercer, which compelled him to take steps forward again and again.

An accomplished Shaolin Monk was certainly no trivial matter. As soon as Great Master Fang-Sheng began using his weapon, the situation of the fight changed immediately. Linghu Chong could vaguely hear the granny gasping heavily as though she had used up her inner strength.

"Throw down your weapons! I won't make this difficult for you. I only want you to come with me to the Shaolin Temple, so I can tell the abbot apprentice brother what happened and then awaits his judgment," Great Master Fang-Sheng said.

The granny did not respond, instead, she suddenly launched a series of quick attacks toward Xin Guoliang, who had a hard time fending them off and retreated from the fight, letting Great Master Fang-Sheng to take it over. After taking a short moment to collect himself, Xin Guoliang rejoined the fight, waving his long sword fiercely. After a few more minutes, the clanking sounds from the weapons clashing against each other gradually slowed down while the turbulence created by the inner energy streams turned louder and louder.

"Your inner strength is no match for me. If I were you, I would have thrown down the weapons and then go to the Shaolin Temple with me. Forcing yourself to go on with the fight would only result in severe internal injury," Great Master Fang-Sheng persuaded.

The granny only replied with an angry snort. But suddenly she shrieked and Linghu Chong felt some kind of watery substance splashing onto the back of his neck. He wiped it with his hand and then looked at the hand, which was now in a color of dark red. What had splashed onto the back of his neck turned out to be blood.

"What a sin! What a sin! With your new wound, you won't be able to hold out much longer. You should know that I have been holding back all along," Great Master Fang-Sheng spoke again.

"This woman is an evil demon. Uncle-Master, please eradicate the evil and avenge the three apprentice brothers. How can we who any mercy to an evil monster?" Xin Guoliang snarled.

Linghu Chong could hear the heavy panting and the staggering footsteps of the granny, and it sounded as if she could be collapsing any minute. "The granny asked me to be her escort so I can protect her. How could I just stand by the side when she is in great danger?" he thought to himself. With an echoing ring, he had unsheathed his long sword.

"Great Master Fang-Sheng, senior master Xin, please stop the fight, or else I'll have no choice but to offend you," Linghu Chong exclaimed loudly.

"We'll just eradicate this evil along with the other evil then," Xin Guoliang bellowed as he thrust his sword toward Linghu Chong's back.

Afraid that he might cast a glance at the granny, Linghu Chong dared not to turn around and simply dodged to the side.

"Watch out!" the granny shouted as Xin Guoliang also adjusted the angle of the thrust and still pushed his long sword toward Linghu Chong's back.

Suddenly Xin Guoliang screeched loudly as his body flew over Linghu Chong's left shoulder with an angle. Then a loud thump followed when his body hit the ground. His limbs twitched a few times before he finally stopped moving. Somehow the granny had managed to hit him with a lethal blow. Only seconds later, there was another loud thump. The granny had been hit with a palm strike from Great Master Fang-Sheng, which sent her flying in the air and

then falling into the bushes.

"Granny, Granny! Are you alright?" Linghu Chong yelled in astonishment, then he heard the granny groaning in an undertone.

Feeling somewhat relieved that the granny was still alive, Linghu Chong turned slightly and then shot a thrust at Fang-Sheng. The positioning of the thrust was extremely clever and Fang-Sheng was forced to leap back. Linghu Chong immediately followed with another thrust, which Fang-Sheng managed to block with his weapon. By the time Linghu Chong withdrew his long sword, he had already turn completely around and was now standing in front of Great Master Fang-Sheng face to face. Now he finally saw the weapon Great Master was using: a three-foot long worn staff.

"Who would have expected his weapon to be simply a short staff?" Linghu Chong was taken aback. "This Shaolin monk's inner strength is too overwhelming. If I don't subdue him with my sword arts, the granny would die for sure." At that thought, he quickly thrust up once, down once, and then up another twice, all using techniques taught by Feng Qingyang.

"You…you…." Great Master Fang-Sheng croaked, his face turning completely white.

Linghu Chong dared not to slow down in anyway, knowing too well what consequences that would have brought. He did not have any internal strength, so any slack would give his opponent the opportunity to overwhelm him with resourceful inner energy. Then undoubtedly he would be killed instantly and the granny would for sure be taken to the Shaolin Temple as a prisoner and later executed. He cleared his mind completely, and then poured out techniques after techniques from the profound "Dugu Nine Swords" at will. The "Dugu Nine Swords" sword art was the utmost fine and ingenious sword art. Although Linghu Chong had lost all his inner strength and had not fully understood all the subtleties of this sword art, his sword attacks forced Great Master Fang-Sheng to back up step after step. Soon, Linghu Chong felt the energy streams soaring inside his chest once again and his arms aching and limp; his sword moves also grew weaker and weaker.

“Drop your sword,” Fang-Sheng suddenly shouted out as his struck his left palm toward Linghu Chong’s solar plexus.

By then, Linghu Chong was already done up. He thrust his sword out, but only half way through with the thrust, his arm dropped down from exhaustion, which also lowered the sword. Grinding his teeth, Linghu Chong pushed the thrust forward anyway, but this slight delay had slowed his thrust quite a bit, and Great Master Fang-Sheng had already placed his left palm on Linghu Chong’s soar plexus, holding his inner strength back, asking, “Dugu Nine Swords! Where…?”

But right at that split of a second, Linghu Chong’s sword also pierced into Fang-Sheng’s pit of stomach. Ever since he met the Shaolin monk, Linghu Chong had held him in the highest regard. As soon as he felt the sword tip touching Fang-Sheng’s skin, he pulled hastily with all his strength and withdrew his sword. Having used too much strength at the pull, he lost his balance and fell to the ground, blood gushing out from his mouth.

“Brilliant sword arts!” Great Master Fang-Sheng pressed his hand onto the wound on his chest and praised brightly. “If young hero had not shown mercy with your sword, my life would have perished right in front of my own eyes.”

He did not mention a word about the fact that he had shown great mercy by holding back the power from his palm strike and began coughing wildly after speaking these words. Although Linghu Chong worked his best to withdraw the sword, the tip of the sword still cut into Fang-Sheng’s chest, leaving a wound over an inch deep, injuring Fang-Sheng seriously.

“I am…am terribly…sorry that I…I have offended you, Great Master,” Linghu Chong gasped.

“I certainly had not thought that senior master Feng Qingyang of Huashan had found a disciple for his brilliant sword arts. I had once received great graciousness from senior master Feng many years ago. Today’s matter, I…I can not decide for myself,” Great Master Fang-Sheng speak softly. Reaching into his rope slowly, he took out a small paper bag and then unwrapped it, showing two

pills in the size of two longans inside. “These are healing panaceas of the Shaolin Temple. You can take one,” he said. After a slight hesitation, he said, “Give the other one to that woman.”

“My injuries are incurable; why waste a perfectly good pill? Great Master, I think you should take the other pill yourself,” Linghu Chong replied.

“I have no need of it.”

Great Master Fang-Sheng shook his head and then set the two pills down in front of Linghu Chong. Turning his head around, he looked at the four corpses on the ground one by one, his face now looking mournful and grieved. Putting his palms together, he began reciting some Buddhist scriptures in a gentle voice, and gradually, a look of harmony started to blossom on his face, and eventually, his face appeared so peaceful as though it was glowing with a divine halo, looking “infinitely merciful.”

Feeling awfully lightheaded, Linghu Chong knew that he could not hold out much longer, so he picked up the two pills and took one down his throat.

When Great Master Fang-Sheng finally finished reciting the scriptures, he turned to Linghu Chong again.

“The disciple of senior master Feng’s Dugu Nine Swords can not have been a follower of evil. Young hero, you have great chivalry deep in your heart. Reasonably speaking, you should not die an untimely death. But the internal injury you are suffering is extremely peculiar and cannot be cured with medicine or acupuncture. The only way for you to stay alive would have to be studying advanced internal Qi-Gong, yourself. If you listen to an old Buddhist monk, I suggest you come to the Shaolin Temple together with me, and then I’ll entreat the Head Master apprentice brother to teach you the utmost supreme internal energy techniques of our Shaolin School. I am sure, then, your internal injuries can be cured.”

After some more coughs, he continued, “Only the few who possess the right Karma can study this set of Qi-Gong techniques. I, for example, do not have such fortune. The Head Master of the Shaolin School, my senior apprentice

brother, is especially large-minded. He might find you the one with the right Karma to teach this supreme Kung Fu to."

"Great Master, many thanks for your kindness. After I've escorted Granny to a safe place, if I were lucky to be still alive, I would pay a visit to the Shaolin Temple and pay my respects to Great Master and the Head Master Abbot," Linghu Chong replied respectfully.

"You…you call her Granny?" A look of surprise spread over Fang-Sheng's face as he muttered. "Young hero, you are an apprentice of a reputable and orthodox school. You should not associate with evil. My suggestion is for your own good. It will be wise to reconsider."

"A true man always keeps his words. How can I break my promise to others," Linghu Chong exclaimed.

"Very well! I look forward to seeing young hero again in the Shaolin Temple." Great Master Fang-Sheng sighed. Casting a quick glance at the four corpses on the ground, he murmured, "Four abandoned vessels,[54] burial or no burial, what difference does it show. When a soul leaves the mortal world, death ends it all." Turning on his heels, he strolled away.

"Granny, are you…are you alright?" Linghu Chong asked while sitting on the ground, unable to move. He gasped wildly, his entire body aching.

Rustling sounds rose from behind his back as the granny came out of the bushes.

"I won't die!" she replied. "You'd better go with that old monk. He said he could cure your internal injuries. The internal Qi-Gong techniques of the Shaolin School are absolutely matchless in the world. Why are you still here?"

"I promised to escort Granny, then of course I'll escort all the way," Linghu Chong answered.

"You've been wounded badly. How can you escort me?"

"Aren't you wounded as well? We'll see!" Linghu Chong grinned.

"I am an evil, heterodox monster, and you are an apprentice of a reputable,

orthodox school. If you associate with me, aren't I ruining the clean name of an apprentice of a reputable school?"

"I never had any clean name to start with. What do I care how others think of me? Granny, you have been so kind to me. Linghu Chong is not one who doesn't know what's right and what's wrong. You have been severely wounded. If I leave you just like that, how can I ever see my own face in a mirror?"

"So you are saying that if I had not incurred any wounds, you would have left me just like that, aren't you?" the granny snapped.

Linghu Chong was slightly taken aback, but he smiled.

"If Granny you don't dislike me, a young and ignorant lad, and would prefer to have me around as company, then Linghu Chong is willing to stay by your side and be your chat partner. But I am afraid that I have always been a crude one who commits all kinds of outrages at will, and maybe only a few days into it, Granny would not want to talk to me any more."

The granny let out a snort but did not answer. Extending his arm backward, Linghu Chong handed the pill given by Great Master Fang-Sheng toward the granny.

"That Shaolin monk is truly remarkable. Granny, you killed four apprentices from his school, but he would rather spare the healing panacea for you instead of taking it himself. When he fought with you earlier, he probably held back some," he said.

"Humph! If he did hold back, how come he still wounded me? People like that pose as members of the reputable and orthodox school, hypocritically pretending to be the good guys. I despise them," the granny replied angrily.

"Granny, why don't you take this pill? After I took one, I did feel much better around my chest and my stomach," Linghu Chong suggested.

The granny acknowledged, but did not take the pill.

"Granny…," Linghu Chong spoke again but was cut off by the granny abruptly.

“We are the only two here. Why do you keep calling ‘Granny,’ ‘Granny?’ Can’t you give it a rest?”

“Sure. That’ll be fine. Why aren’t you taking the pill?” Linghu Chong grinned.

“Since you think the healing pill of the Shaolin School is great, and the healing pill I gave you is no good, why didn’t you take this pill from the old monk together with the one you took earlier?” the granny mocked.

“What? When did I ever say that your healing pill is no good? You are really wronging me. Besides, the Shaolin School’s healing pill is great, and that’s why I want you to take it, so you can gather up some strength sooner for the journey.”

“I see, so you think it’s too boring to be my company, don’t you? Go ahead! Leave! Nobody is stopping you,” the granny snapped again.

“Why is the granny so grumpy all of a sudden, always at odds with me? Oh, I got it. She is suffering from severe wounds and is not feeling well, then naturally her temper went high. I can’t really blame her,” Linghu Chong thought to himself. Grinning brightly, he said, “But I am too exhausted to even move half a step. Even if I wanted to go, I couldn’t. Besides…besides…ha-ha….”

“Besides what? Ha-ha what?” the granny asked in an annoyed tone.

‘Ha-ha is ha-ha. Besides, even if I could go, I wouldn’t have wanted to go, unless you’ll go together with me,” Linghu Chong beamed.

At first, he had always maintained good manners when talking with the granny, but when she started to throw a fit and became unreasonable, he also became unbridled. But to his surprise, the granny did not get angry and suddenly fell into a silence, lost in thought.

“Granny…,” Linghu Chong called out.

“You are calling me Granny again! Have you never called others ‘Granny’ before? Don’t you get tired of calling that?” the granny reproved.

“From now on, I won’t call you granny any more. How should I call you then?” Linghu Chong asked with a smile.

The granny did not answer him right away. Only after a few moments, she finally said, “We are the only two here. Why bother? As soon as you open your mouth, I’ll know that you are talking to me. Could you have been talking to anybody else?”

“Sometimes I like to talk to myself. I hope you don’t misunderstand,” Linghu Chong smirked.

“Always talking so roguishly, no wonder your little apprentice sister doesn’t want you.” The granny snorted.

These words struck Linghu Chong right on the spot in his heart where it hurt the most. His heart sinking horribly, he couldn’t help but think, “Little apprentice sister dislikes me and likes apprentice brother Lin. Maybe that really is because I am always roguish in doing things and saying things. That’s why she was unwilling to commit her life to my care. That’s right. Apprentice brother Lin always toes the line and acts like a perfect gentleman, almost an exact duplicate of Master. If I were a girl, I would have liked him and not the always ill-behaved prodigal, let alone little apprentice sister. Alas, Linghu Chong! Linghu Chong! You always get drunk and run wild, pay no attention to school rules and regulations. You are beyond redemption. I made friends with the evil rapist Tian Boguang; I slept inside the brothel in the town of Hengyang. Little apprentice sister must have felt awful!”

“Why? Did I touch a sour spot? You are angry now, aren’t you?” didn’t hear a reply from Linghu Chong, the granny asked.

“No, I am not angry. You said it right. I always talk roguishly and doing things roguishly. No wonder little apprentice sister dislikes me, and Master, Master-Wife also dislike me.” Linghu Chong answered, his voice gloomy.

“Don’t be depressed. Your Master, Master-Wife, and your little apprentice sister dislike you doesn’t mean that there’s…there’s no one else who likes you,” the granny comforted him, her voice so soft and gentle, filled with consolation.

Linghu Chong was utterly grateful. A feeling of warmth washing over him; he felt something choking in his throat.

“Granny, you are so kind to me, so even if nobody else in this world likes me, that…that would be all right.”

“You surely have a honey mouth, always speaking pleasant things. No wonder even people like Blue Phoenix of the Five-Sylph Sect was full of praises when talking about you. Very well, you can’t walk, and I can’t walk either. We’ll just have to spend the night over there under that cliff. I wonder whether we’ll die today.”

“If we survive today, I wonder whether we’ll die tomorrow. If we survive tomorrow, I wonder whether we’ll die the day after.” Linghu Chong grinned.

“Drop it! You crawl over there slowly and I’ll be right after you.”

“But if you don’t take this pill from the old monk, I am afraid I don’t even have enough strength to crawl one step,” Linghu Chong whined.

“You are talking nonsense again. If I don’t take that pill, why are you the one having no strength to crawl?” the granny asked.

“This is definitely not nonsense. If you don’t take the pill, your injury won’t recover soon, and for sure you would not be in a mood to play the zither. Then I’d be all worried to death and where do you expect me to find strength to crawl over? I won’t even have any strength to just lie here, much less crawling over,” Linghu Chong explained.

“Even lying here requires your strength?” The granny chuckled.

“That’s of course. This is a slope here. If I don’t use my strength to hold myself still, I would have rolled all the way down it and fallen into the mountain gully down below. Then either I’ll smash myself to pieces or drown.”

“Even when you are so severely injured, not knowing whether you can make it till tomorrow, you are still in such a merrily mood to joke about. People as cheeky as this had to be rare in this world.” The granny sighed.

Linghu Chong threw the pill back behind his back gently. “Will you just take it, please?” he pleaded

“Anyone who poses as a member of the reputable and orthodox schools can

not be an good egg. If I take this pill of the Shaolin School, it will only dirty my mouth," the granny let out an irritated snort.

"Ouch!" Linghu Chong suddenly cried as he leaned his upper body to the left and then rolled toward the mountain gully down the slope.

"Look out!" astounded, the granny shouted.

Linghu Chong kept on rolling. The slop was not very steep, but very long. It took Linghu Chong a good while to finally roll to the edge of the gully. Spreading his arms and legs widely Linghu Chong stopped himself from rolling any further.

"Hey? Hello? Are you all right?" the granny shouted.

The sharp rocks along the slope gave Linghu Chong's face and arms quite some cuts and bruises, but he kept his silence in spite of the fierce pain.

"Fine! I'll take the old monk's stinking pill. Get…get back up here," the granny shouted again.

"You've said it. You can't go back to your words," Linghu Chong replied.

At the moment there was already quite a distance between the two. Linghu Chong didn't have any inner strength, so his voice couldn't reach very far. The granny only vaguely heard some indistinct sounds, but couldn't make out what he had said.

"What did you say?" she asked.

"I…I…," Linghu Chong wanted to answer, but had to gasp for air.

"Hurry, come up here! I promise I'll take the pill," the granny shouted.

Linghu Chong tottered back onto his feet and tired to climb up the slope, but to roll down the slope was way much easier than climbing back up it again. Only after two steps, his leg suddenly gave out under him, and after some staggering, thump, he really fell into the mountain gully.

Seeing how Linghu Chong fell into the mountain gully from high above with a good view, the granny was stunned. Giving it no thought, she also rolled

downward along the slope. When she finally rolled by Linghu Chong's side, she reached out and grabbed onto his left ankle with her left hand. After taking in a few deep breaths, she clutched his back robe and then pulled a dripping-wet Linghu Chong out of the water.

By then Linghu Chong had swallowed many gulps of water and golden sparkles danced in front of his eyes. He shook his head slightly trying to pull himself together when suddenly he noticed the two inverted images reflected in the water: a young girl clutching his back robe tightly in her hand. Feeling very muddleheaded, he then heard the girl uttering a painful cry from behind his back, spilling a mouthful of warm blood onto the back of his neck. The girl bent over his back as though she had been paralyzed. Feeling the girl's soft body leaning on his back and her long hair brushing against his face, Linghu Chong found himself at a loss, as though all his emotions had been emptied out of his heart. He took another look at the reflection in the water. Half of the girl's face could be seen from the reflection in the water. Her eyes were shut tight, and her long eyelashes swayed in the breeze. Even though he could not see very clearly from the reflection in the water, he could still tell that she was a gorgeous-looking girl seventeen or eighteen years of age.

"Who is this girl? Why did a young girl suddenly come out of nowhere to rescue me?" he was deeply amazed. The reflection in the water and the feeling on his back were both telling him that the girl had fainted. Linghu Chong wanted to turn around and prop the girl up, but his entire body felt weak, and he didn't even have enough strength to raise a finger. It felt as though he was in the middle of a dream. He gave another look at the graceful appearance in the reflection of the water and could not decide if he had arrived at a wonderland. All he could think was, "Am I dead already? Am I in heaven?"

A long while passed when the girl on his back finally came around.

"Were you just trying to scare me, or did you really…really want to kill yourself?" she asked, her voice trembling slightly.

As soon as Linghu Chong heard her voice, he almost jumped out of his skin. The voice he had just heard was completely identical to the voice of the granny.

Shocked beyond description, he muttered, trembling, “You…you…you….”

“What? I just won’t take the old monk’s stinking pill. Go ahead, commit suicide and show me,” the girl snapped.

“Granny, so you are a…a pretty, little…little girl!” Linghu Chong muttered.

“How did you know?” the girl screeched. “You…you promise-breaker! Have you peeped?”

As soon as she looked down and then saw a clear reflection in the mountain gully of herself leaning on Linghu Chong’s back, her face turned completely scarlet, and she hurriedly struggled to stand up. But right after she straightened her back, her knees became weak and she fell right onto Linghu Chong’s bosom. After a few frantic try to prop herself backup, which almost made her faint once more, she had to lay still.

Linghu Chong’s heart was filled with puzzlement. “Why did you disguise as an elderly granny to fool me? Pretend to be a senior master, and caused me… caused me…” he asked eagerly.

“Caused you what?” the girl asked.

The girl’s cheek was only about a foot from Linghu Chong’s eyes. Her skin was so white as though it was made out of crystal, and dimly showing a shade of flush beneath the skin.

“Caused me to call you granny this and granny that all the way. Humph, shame on you! You aren’t even old enough to be my younger sister, yet you want to be my granny! If you want to be a granny, better wait at least another eighty years!”

“When did I ever say that I was a granny?” the girl chuckled. “It was you who wanted to call me granny. Didn’t I get mad at you because you kept calling me ‘Granny’ just now? Told you to not call me that, but you just wouldn’t listen. Am I right?”

Linghu Chong had to agree inwardly that these words were very true. But having been hoodwinked for so long and having acted like a complete fool on his part, he couldn’t just let it go easily.

“You deceived me on purpose when you disallowed me from looking at your face. If I had looked at you face to face, would I have called you a granny? It even goes all the way back to the city of Luo Yang. Even back then you intentionally tricked me, colluding with Elder Bamboo-Green that old goat and asking him to call you auntie. He was already so old, and since you were his auntie, how can I not call you a granny?”

“Elder Bamboo-Green’s Master calls my dad Uncle-Master, then what should Elder Bamboo-Green address me as?” The girl grinned.

Linghu Chong was taken by surprise. “Are you really Elder Bamboo-Green’s auntie?” he asked hesitantly.

“That bloke Elder Bamboo-Green is not someone extraordinary. Why would I want to pretend to be his auntie? What’s so great about been an auntie?”

“Well! I am so stupid. I should have already known.” Linghu Chong heaved a sigh.

“Have already known what?” the girl asked, giggling.

“Your voice is so pleasant. How can there be any eighty-year old granny in this world with such a tender and melodious voice?”

“My voice is so coarse and hoarse, like the croaks of a crow. No wonder you thought I was an old granny,” the girl said, beaming.

“Your voice is like the croaks of a crow? Wow, the world has really changed. So croaks of crows nowadays actually sound more pleasant than the singing of the orioles.”

The girl knew that Linghu Chong was praising her. A quick flush shot across her cheeks as her heart thumped with joy.

“Alright, alright! Grandpa Linghu! Senior master Linghu! You’ve called me Granny for so long, now I’ll call you back. Will that even it up for you? Are you happy now?” the granny reconciled.

“If you are Granny, and I am Grandpa, then we are the Grandpa and Granny. Aren’t we…?” Linghu Chong said in a big grin.

He had always been the unrestrained and uninhibited type, having no scruples when he talked. He was just about to say "aren't we a couple then" when he suddenly noticed the knitted eyebrows and the angry look on the girl's face, so he shut up abruptly.

"What kind of nonsense are you talking about?" the girl growled.

"I said that if we are the Grandpa and Granny, aren't we…aren't we both senior masters of the Martial World?" Linghu Chong answered.

The girl knew very well that he had just gone out of his way to change his wording, but decided to not pursue the case, afraid that he might spill out even more coarse terms. Learning on Linghu Chong's bosom and sensing the strong scent of a male in her nose, she had already felt great distractions in her heart. She really wanted to stand up, but her limbs simply would not comply. With a blushed face, she demanded, "Hey, give me a push!"

"Give you a push for what?" Linghu Chong asked.

"The way…the way we are…is very inappropriate," the girl said.

"It's appropriate for Grandpa and Granny," Linghu Chong grinned.

"If you keep talking rubbish, I'll kill you!" the girl yelled in a stern voice.

Linghu Chong felt a chill on his back as he remembered how she had made dozens of men cutting out their own eyes and then banished them to the Twine-Dragon Island in the East Sea, and he dared not making any more jokes. Then he remembered, "Even in such a young age, she was able to kill four apprentices of the Shaolin School with simply a raise of her hand. Such excellent Kung Fu skills combined with such ruthless conducts, it is so hard to believe that these traits all belonged to this delicately pretty girl right in front of my eyes."

"You are getting angry again, aren't you? You are a man, how come you are so intolerant?" receiving no answer from Linghu Chong, the girl spoke again.

"I am not angry. I am feeling afraid, afraid that you'll kill me," Linghu Chong answered.

"If you remain well-behaved from now on, why would I want to kill you?"

The girl cackled.

‘But I was born one with a nature of not behaving well, it’s not like that I had a choice. I guess I am doomed to die in your hands.” Linghu Chong sighed.

“When you were calling me Granny, you showed a lot of respect to me. That was good, very well behaved. Just keep that going and you’ll be fine,” the girl said with a snigger.

“No way! Once I know that you are a little girl, I can no longer regard you as a granny.” Linghu Chong shook his head.

“What…what…?” the girl muttered, but suddenly she seemed to have thought of something; she blushed and shut her mouth.

Linghu Chong bent his neck slightly, and took in a good view of the girl’s face. It was a beautiful face, so sweet and charming, still carrying the tender coyness of a young girl, prettier than anything else in the world. In an almost dreamlike state, he felt a slight tickle in his heart, and before he knew it, had already moved his head closer and kissed the girl gently on the cheek.

The girl was shocked, and out of nowhere, she suddenly found some strength inside her that wasn’t there a minute ago. Turning her hand over, she slapped Linghu Chong heavily in the face, and immediately after, she sprang up. But the strength disappeared as abruptly as it had come; still in the midair, she found herself just as weak as a second ago, and a faction of a second later, she fell back onto Linghu Chong’s bosom once again, only this time she felt even feebler than the last time, and could no longer move a muscle.

“If you…if you do that again, I’ll…kill you,” afraid that Linghu Chong might take even more liberties with her and feeling utterly apprehensive, she muttered sternly.

“Whether you kill me or not, I have not much time left in this life, anyway, I think I’d rather do it again,” Linghu Chong grinned.

“I…I…I…,” the girl gasped in great worry, yet found herself at her wit’s end.

After working hard to gather some strength, Linghu Chong propped the girl’s

shoulder slightly and then rolled away to the side.

"Whatcha gonna do?" he asked with a grin, but right after these words, he coughed violently and spilled out a few mouthful of blood.

Having become enamored all of a sudden and kissed the girl, he regretted immediately. Then after getting hit on the face, even though he was still firm in speech, he knew he shouldn't have done so and dared not to stay close to her any longer.

Linghu Chong rolling away from her all of a sudden took the girl by great surprise. Seeing blood coming out of his mouth once again after he used his strength, she felt regretful secretly, but thin-skinned as she was, she could not bring herself to speak any of it.

"Your…your chest is hurting pretty bad, isn't it?" she finally asked gently.

"It's not my chest that's hurting, it's somewhere else," Linghu Chong replied.

"Where are you hurting then?" the girl asked hurriedly, her voice filled with concern.

"Here!" Linghu Chong stroked his cheek where the girl had slapped him.

"If you want me to apologize to you, alright, I am sorry." The girl smiled.

"It's my fault. Granny, will you please forgive me?" Linghu Chong said.

Hearing him calling her "Granny" again, the girl burst into giggles.

"Where's that stinking pill from the old monk? You never took it, did you?" Linghu Chong asked.

"I didn't have time to pick it up," the girl replied and then pointed at the top of the slope. "It's still up there." She paused for a second and then continued, "I'll listen to you and take it when we get back up there, and not think about the stinking part."

The two of them lay at the bottom of the slope and looked up. If it had been normal days, a simple leap would have gotten them up the slope, but now it looked almost like a ten-thousand-foot perilous peak that could never be

reached. After exchanging some stares between each other, both of them sighed at the same time.

"I'll mediate for a while. Don't interrupt me, alright?" the girl finally said.

"Alright!" Linghu Chong answered and then watched the girl leaning against the slope, closing her eyes, holding her thumb, index finger, and middle finger in a unique pose, and froze in a trance. "Even the way she meditate is so different from others. She didn't need to sit up with crossed legs at all."

He tried to calm himself and also take a rest, but the energy streams inside him rolled over and over and he could only struggle in vain. Suddenly a few croaks from a frog broke the stillness, and soon a corpulent frog hopped by him along the bank of the gully. Linghu Chong was delighted. After the much fuss over the last half a day, his stomach had been keen for some food, and now food had just hopped right next to him, how perfect! Wasting no time, he reached for the frog, but his aching and limp arm obviously not cooperating, and he missed the target. With another hop, the frog jumped away from him, croaking loudly as though it was quite pleased with the getaway and jeering at Linghu Chong for his incapability, which Linghu Chong returned with a sigh. But there turned out to be quite a few frogs along the gully, and soon another two frogs hopped by Linghu Chong, who still failed to catch either of them. Suddenly, a thin and delicate hand reached out by his waist and with an easy grip, caught the frog. After meditating for a while, the girl had regained her mobility. Although she still felt feeble and weary, it didn't pose any challenge for her to catch a few frogs.

"Wonderful! Wonderful! We can have a feast of frogs now!" Linghu Chong cheered, which the girl returned with a small grin. She went on catching more frogs, catching a frog with each stretch of her arm. Only a few moments later, she had already caught over twenty frogs.

"That's plenty! Will you please go collect some branches for the fire? I'll clean these frogs," Linghu Chong directed.

The girl went in compliance and soon returned with enough branches. Linghu

Chong drew his long sword and began chopping the heads of the frogs off and cleaning out the internal organs.

"The ancients killed the chicken with a cattle knife,[55] and today our Big Hero Linghu kills frogs with the Dugu Nine Swords!" the girl said jokingly, and Linghu Chong broke into a loud laugh.

"If Big Hero Dugu could hear this in the underworld, knowing that his disciple was so unworthy, he had to be enraged to…." he stopped abruptly, thinking that Dugu Seeking-a-loss had been dead for many years, how could he have been enraged to death again?

"Big Hero Linghu…," the girl spoke again.

"I really don't deserve the name Big Hero. Where do you go find a Big Hero who slaughters frogs?" Linghu Chong shook his hand together with the dead frog in it.

"Well, there was a Dog-Butchering Champion[56] in the ancient times, why can't we have a Frog-Slaughtering Hero today?" the girl chuckled. "This Dugu Nine Swords of yours is marvelous. Even the old monk from the Shaolin School couldn't beat you. He said that the senior master named Feng, who taught you the sword art, is his benefactor. What was that about?"

"The senior master who taught me the sword art is a grandmaster of our Huashan School," Linghu Chong explained.

"This senior master's sword skills must have been almost magical. How come he is so nameless in the Martial World?" the girl asked.

"Well…well…I promised the grandmaster that I'll never let out his story and his whereabouts," Linghu Chong muttered.

"Humph, who cares? Even if you do tell me, what makes you think I'd be interested? Do you know who I am and what kind of backing I have?" the girl challenged.

"I don't know. I don't even know what's your name," Linghu Chong answered, shaking his head.

“You are holding things back from me, so I won’t tell you, either!” the girl exclaimed.

“Although I don’t know, I’ve figured most of it out,” Linghu Chong replied.

“You figured it out? How did you figure it out?” The girl’s face changed color slightly.

“Well, I am not a hundred percent sure yet, but it will be all crystal clear tonight.”

“How would it be crystal clear tonight?” the girl couldn’t help but ask, feeling even more surprised.

“I’ll just look up in the sky and see which star is missing, then I’ll know which goddess has decided to descend to the world. You are as beautiful as an angel, and angels don’t come from the secular world.”

“Bah!” the girl spit at him, blushing wildly, yet feeling immense pleasure inward. “You are talking nonsense again,” she murmured gently.

By then, she had already lit the fire with the dead twigs and fuzz sticks. Stringing the already cleaned frogs onto a sharp stick, she roasted them above the bonfire. Frog grease dripped into the bonfire and made funny sounds as the wonderful smell of roasted frogs soon filled the air. Staring at the white smoke rising from the bonfire, she spoke gently.

“My name is ‘Ying-Ying.’ Now that I’ve told you, I wonder if you’ll still remember it as days go by.”

“Ying-Ying? That’s a pretty name. If I had know that your name was Ying-Ying, I would never have called you Granny,” Linghu Chong uttered.

“Why’s that?” Ying-Ying asked.

“The name Ying-Ying obviously is the name of a little girl, then of course you can’t have been an old granny.”

“When I get old and really become an old granny, I wouldn’t change my name. I’d still be called Ying-Ying,” Ying-Ying smiled.

“You wont’ become an old granny. You are so pretty, even when you are eighty years old, you’ll still be a very beautiful little girl.”

“Wouldn’t that make me a monster?” Ying-Ying beamed. She waited for a few seconds and then said with a serious face, “I’ve told you my name, but you are not allowed to use it to call me.”

“Why?”

“You are just not allowed. I don’t want you to.”

Linghu Chong stuck his tongue out and made a face. “This is not allowed, and that is not allowed. Later whoever becomes your….” he muttered. Then at the sight of Ying-Ying pulling a long face, he quickly stopped, and Ying-Ying grunted heavily.

“Why are you getting angry again? I was saying that later whoever becomes your apprentice has gotten to be suffering some hardship.” He had wanted to say “husband” at first, but after sensing trouble ahead, he quickly changed it to “apprentice.”

Ying-Ying of course had a very good idea what he had wanted to say at the first place. “You are neither serious nor honest,” she exclaimed. “Out of every three sentences of yours, there are at least two of them incoherent. I…I won’t force anyone to do anything. If he likes to listen to my words, then he’ll listen. If he doesn’t, that’s his choice.”

“I like to listen to your words,” Linghu Chong beamed at her. Even this sentence had some teasing elements in it.

Ying-Ying knitted her beautiful eyebrows in a straight line as though she was about to have a fit of anger, but suddenly her face turned scarlet and she turned her head away. For a good while, the both of them just set there, neither one said a word.

Suddenly, they smelled a terrible scent. Something was burning. “Oops!” Ying-Ying cried out when she realized that the burning smell had come from the string of frogs on the stick in her hands. They had been terribly scorched.

“This is all your fault!” she complained.

“You should have said that thanks to my joking with you and making you mad, you were finally able to make such splendid scorched frogs!” Linghu Chong grinned. Pulling a scorched frog off the stick, he tore the frog leg off and then gave it a good chew. “Delicious! Delicious! Only this degree of heating would be just right, adding a little bit of bitter into sweet, and then the sweet taste really comes out when the bitter wears out. This has gotten to be the most delicious food in the world!” he praised.

Amused, Ying-Ying broke into a giggle, and also started eating. Linghu Chong hurried and ate the most burnt frog meat and left the not too badly burnt part for her.

After the two of them finished the roasted frog meat, they lay down to the ground. Bathing in the warm sunshine of the afternoon, both of them were taken over by fatigue and before they knew it, they both closed their eyes and fell asleep.

Since both of them had stayed up through the previous night, and both had injuries, the nap was deep and sound for each of them. In his dream, Linghu Chong found himself practicing sword arts in the waterfall together with Yue Lingshan. But suddenly another man showed up, and it was Lin Pingzhi. Then he had a sword contest with Lin Pingzhi, but he had no strength in his arms, and when he tried hard to use techniques of the Dugu Nine Swords, he just couldn’t remember any of it. Again and again, Lin Pingzhi stabbed him in his solar plexus, his stomach, his head, and his shoulders. Then he saw Yue Lingshan bursting into loud laughter. Feeling both shocked and infuriated, he shouted loudly, “Little apprentice sister! Little apprentice sister!” Only after a few cries, he woke up from the dream abruptly. Then he heard a soft voice say, “Did you dream of your little apprentice sister? How was she treating you?”

“Someone wants to kill me. Little apprentice sister not only ignored me, but also…also laughed at me!” Linghu Chong said, his inside writhed with bitterness.

“You have sweat all over your forehead,” Ying-Ying sighed and said tenderly.

Raising his arm, Linghu Chong wiped the sweat off with his sleeve. A cold breeze suddenly blew by him and he shivered. Then he noticed the star filled sky. It was at night already.

As soon as Linghu Chong regained his consciousness, he calmed down. Just when he was about to open his mouth and speak, Ying-Ying reached her hand out and covered his mouth.

“Someone is coming,” she whispered.

Linghu Chong concentrated his attention and listened carefully. Sure enough, sounds of three men’s footsteps rose from a distance.

“There are two more dead bodies,” a while later, one of them spoke, and Linghu Chong recognized that to be Zu Qianqiu’s voice.

“Ah, this one is a monk of the Shaolin School,” another one uttered. It was Old Man who had just discovered Jue-Yue’s body.

Ying-Ying slowly withdrew her hand, and then they heard Ji Wushi’s voice.

“These three are also laymen apprentices of the Shaolin School. Why have they all died here? Oh, this man is Xin Guoliang. He was an elite fighter of the Shaolin School.”

“Who could be so powerful, killing four elite fighters from the Shaolin School all at once?” Zu Qianqiu asked.

“Unless…unless it was someone from the Dark-Wood Cliff? Maybe it was Chief Dongfang, himself?” Old Man murmured haltingly.

“That could well be,” Ji Wushi agreed. “We’d better bury these four bodies in a hurry, so people from the Shaolin School wouldn’t find it out,” he suggested.

“But if it were really someone from the Dark-Wood Cliff who had done this, they wouldn’t be afraid of the Shaolin Temple finding out about this. Perhaps they had left these corpses here on purpose to put on a show of force,” Zu Qianqiu speculated.

“If they had wanted to put on a show of force, they wouldn’t have left these corpses in the middle of nowhere. If we weren’t just happen to pass by here, these corpses would have been eaten by wild animals, and no one would have found out about it. When the Sacred Sun Moon Cult wanted to put on a show of force, most likely they would have hanged these corpses in the middle of the capital city and then marked clearly on the bodies that they are members of the Shaolin School to humiliate the Shaolin School.” Ji Wushi said.

“I think you are right! Most likely when people from the Dark-Wood Cliff killed these four, they were in a hurry to pursue more enemies, and didn’t have time to bury the bodies,” Zu Qianqiu concurred.

Soon, sounds of digging rose as the three began to dig the ground with their weapons, ready to bury the bodies.

“These three men had to be somehow related to Chief Dongfang of the Dark-Wood Cliff, otherwise, they wouldn’t have gone through so much trouble,” Linghu Chong thought to himself.

Suddenly, Zu Qianqiu uttered a cry of surprise. “What’s this? It’s a healing pill,” he said.

“This is the healing panacea of the Shaolin School. It has the power to return dead to life. I bet that it must have fallen out of a pocket of these Shaolin apprentices,” Ji Wushi concluded after sniffing the pill a few times.

“How would you know?” Zu Qianqiu asked.

“Many years ago, I saw one just like this at an old monk from Shaolin,” Ji Wushi explained.

“That’s just wonderful. Brother Old, since this is a healing panacea, you can let your daughter Not-Dead take this and it will cure her disease,” Zu Qianqiu suggested.

“Well, my daughter’s fate would only be the second priority. We should hurry to find Young Master Linghu and let him take this pill,” Old Man replied, which made Linghu Chong feeling utterly grateful.

“That’s the pill Ying-Ying dropped earlier. How can I ask for it back from Old Man, so she could take it?” he thought over.

He turned his head and looked at Ying-Ying. Under the dim moonlight, Ying-Ying grinned at him. She suddenly made a face, looking almost childlike, bearing a most charming smile on her lips. It was so hard to believe that she had just killed four master hands from the Shaolin School not too long ago. Then he heard the sounds of the three filling the grave they just dug up with rocks and soil to cover up the corpses.

“There’s a big problem though. Night Owl, help me think here,” Old Man muttered.

“What problem?” Ji Wushi asked.

“Right now, Young Master Linghu must be together with…with the Sacred Lady. If I bring the pill over, I’ll bump into the Sacred Lady inevitably. It’s all right if the Sacred Lady kills me out of annoyance, but for sure she would have felt very offended and displeased, and that would not be a good thing.” Old man murmured.

“So they are referring you as the Sacred Lady, and are just completely fearful of you. Why are you so apt to kill people?” casting a glance at Ying-Ying, Linghu Chong thought to himself.

“Well, I think those three blind men we saw on the road could be very useful then. We’ll catch up with those three and ask them to deliver the pill to Young Master Linghu. Since they are blind already, even when they find Young Master Linghu together with the Sacred Lady, it wouldn’t end up a fatal disaster,” Ji Wushi replied.

“But I suspect that their eyes were cut out because they saw the Sacred Lady together with Young Master Linghu,” Zu Qianqiu added.

“That’s got to be it!” Old Man struck his own thigh and uttered. “If not, why would three perfectly fine men suddenly went blind? I bet you these four Shaolin apprentices must have had the same kind of misfortune of bumping into the Sacred Lady and Young Master Linghu.”

At that word, the trio fell silent, and Linghu Chong finding himself with more doubts and suspicious. Then he heard Zu Qianqiu spoke again after a sigh.

"I just hope Young Master Linghu would have a speedy recovery from his injury, so the Sacred Lady can make a happy loving couple with him soon. As long as they are not married, there is no peace in the Martial World."

Linghu Chong was astounded. He sneaked a peek toward Ying-Ying. Under the dim night-light, he could vaguely make out a scarlet face and a pair of bright eyes, which blazed with irritation. Afraid that Ying-Ying would leap out and hurt the three, he extended his right hand and then held onto her left hand gently. He could feel that Ying-Ying's entire body was shaking wildly, but he could not tell if it was because of rage or shyness.

"Who would have thought the Sacred Lady would get so mad at us for our gathering on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge," Zu Qianqiu went on. "Alas, a man and a woman finding themselves in a passion of love is really the most natural thing, and for someone like Young Master Linghu, an exceptional young hero so unrestrained and benevolent, only a girl as beautiful as the Sacred Lady would be suitable as the counterpart. Why would the Sacred Lady, someone so marvelous, act so bashful like any other vulgar girl? She obviously likes Young Master Linghu very much, yet would not allow anyone to mention that, or to see that together. Wouldn't that have been…been a bit unreasonable?"

"Really? I wonder if these words of his are true or not," Linghu Chong thought.

Suddenly, he felt a strong jerk from Ying-Ying's hand in his palm, trying to break free of his grip. He immediately grabbed even tighter, very afraid that Ying-Ying would kill the three of them instantly out of fury.

"Although the Sacred Lady enjoys exceptional status on the Dark-Wood Cliff, even Chief Dongfang never defied her wish, she is just a young girl after all," Ji Wushi said. "When a young girl falls in love with someone the very first time in her life, even though she likes him so very much in her heart, she would still feel very shy and sensitive about it. This time when we tried to fawn on her,

though we had good intention, we still made her very displeased. Too bad that all of us are crude fellows and had no idea about young girls' feelings. There were a few dozen girls and ladies on the Five-Tyrant Ridge, but unfortunately, their dispositions were not that different from any man. The Five-Tyrant Ridge get-together, the brownnosing the Sacred Lady did not like. When this episode gets out, those bastards from the orthodox schools are going to laugh their ass off."

"The Sacred Lady has done us great favor, and all of us are grateful to her and only wanted to seek ways to repay her kindness by curing her lover's injury. A true man remembers his gratitude and his grudges; to a benefactor he pays a debt of gratitude, and to an enemy, he seeks his revenge. What's wrong with that? If any bastard dares to laugh at us, I'll skin him alive," Old Man declared solemnly.

By then, Linghu Chong finally understood. The so many people flattering and fawning on him along his way did so all for the sake of this Sacred Lady named Ying-Ying. And the over one thousand people breaking up a hubbub and leaving in a hurry on top of the Five-Tyrant Ridge was also because the Sacred Lady didn't want any others to know her feelings and became very displeased when this was made widely known in the entire Martial World. Then he thought of something else: If this Sacred Lady, such a young girl, could make so many fellows of the Martial World to fawn on him, she had to be a world-shaking figure in the Demon's Cult. According to Ji Wushi, even Dongfang Invincible, the one known as the "Number One in the Martial World" never defied her wishes. Linghu Chong was only a nobody in the Martial World, and happened to made her acquaintance by learning the zither from her with a curtain in between at a small alley in the Luoyang city. There was never any feeling of love involved. Could it be that Elder Bamboo-Green had misunderstood it and let the rumor out, which made the Sacred Lady very angry? Then he heard Zu Qianqiu's voice again.

"Old Man said it right. The Sacred Lady granted us great favor and kindness. If there is anything we can do to help to bring them together and make her

happy all her life, even if we have to have our body smashed to pieces, we will die with nothing to regret. Being snubbed on the Five-Tyrant Ridge is really nothing. But…but Young Master Linghu is the Head Apprentice of the Huashan School, which is at daggers drawn with the Dark-Wood Cliff. I am afraid that there will probably be many obstacles to overcome before this marriage would work out."

"I've gotten an idea. Why don't we take Yue Buqun, the Head Master of the Huashan School, hostage, and then at knife's point, coerce him into upholding this marriage?" Ji Wushi suggested.

"That's an wonderful idea, Night Owl!" Zu Qianqiu and Old Man cheered together. "There's no time to lose. Let's set off right now for the capture of Yue Buqun," they said.

"But that Mr. Yue is the Head Master of a renown school. He must have great attainments in both the inner energy department and the sword art department. If we fight him, firstly, we don't have a sure win, and secondly, even if we do catch him, I am sure he would rather die than submit. What are we gonna do then?" Ji Wushi asked.

"Then we'll just have to kidnap his wife and daughter to add pressure for him," Old Man replied.

"I agree! But we must do everything in secret, and not let anyone else know about it to make Huashan School lose face. Young Master Linghu would for sure be very displeased if he ever finds out that we have offended his Master," Zu Qianqiu added.

In the next moment, the three began discussing details as to how they could kidnap Madam Yue and Yue Lingshan.

"Hey, you three reckless chaps, get out of here right now and stop bothering me!" Ying-Ying suddenly spoke, her voice loud and clear.

Seeing her opening her mouth and speak all of a sudden, Linghu Chong was stunned. He held her hand with an even tighter grip. Ji Wushi, Zu Qianqiu, and Old Man were simply thunderstruck.

“Yes, yes…I…I…I….” Old Man muttered, but after saying the word “I” three times, the terror started to sink in, and he froze.

“Yes, yes, your highness! We were only talking nonsense. The Sacred Lady will not take that seriously. We’ll head straight to the Western Regions tomorrow and never return to the Central Plains,” Ji Wushi muttered.

“That’s three more who have just been banished for life,” Linghu Chong thought to himself.

“Who asked you to go to the Western Region? I have something I’d like the three of you handle for me,” getting back onto her feet, Ying-Ying said coldly.

“The Sacred Lady speaks the word, and we’ll do it with all our heart,” the trio replied in unison, each feeling overjoyed.

“I want to kill a person, but could not find him right away. You can spread the word out: whoever kills this man will be guaranteed a handsome reward from me,” Ying-Ying instructed.

“We really don’t deserve any reward. If the Sacred Lady wants this person dead, even if the three brothers of us have to chase him to the end of the world, we’ll find him and kill him. May I ask the Sacred Lady the name of the stupid scoundrel who was so audacious to offend the Sacred Lady?” Zu Qianqiu asked.

“With only the three of you, you would not have enough eyes and ears to trace him. You must spread the word to the entire Martial World immediately,” Ying-Ying ordered.

“Yes, yes, your highness,” the three replied all together.

“Get on to it, then,” Ying-Ying demanded.

“Yes, your highness. Will the Sacred Lady please inform us which daring rascal does she wish to kill?” Zu Qianqiu asked.

“This person’ surname is Linghu and his name is Chong. He is an apprentice of the Huashan School.” Ying-Ying let out an irritated snort.

These words struck Linghu Chong, Ji Wushi, Zu Qianqiu, and Old Man like thunderbolts, and none of them knew what to say. A good while later, Old Man finally managed to mumble a few words out of this mouth, “That…that….”

“What about that? Are you afraid of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance and have not the courage to touch an apprentice of the Huashan School?” Ying-Ying snapped in a stern voice.

“When we serve the Sacred Lady, even the Jade Emperor[57] or the Lord of the Underworld can be subject to our wrath, much less the Five Mountains Sword Alliance. We’ll try to capture Linghu…Linghu Chong and bring him to the Sacred Lady’s judgment. Old Man, Zu Qianqiu, let’s go,” Ji Wushi answered.

“Young Master Linghu must have somehow offended the Sacred Lady in their conversations,” Old Man thought to himself. “The more intimate a young couple are, the easier they are at odds with each other. Many years ago when Not-Dead’s mom and I loved each other so deeply like honey mixed with oil, didn’t we also quarrel and fight everyday? Alas, if it weren’t because I punched Not-Dead’s mom so hard on the stomach when she still had the baby inside her that had messed up the pregnancy, Not-Dead the girl wouldn’t have gotten the disease before she was even born. I guess I’ll have no choice but to invite Young Master Linghu to see the Sacred Lady and let her deal with him, herself.”

Just when Old Man was still in the middle of wild flights of thoughts, Ying-Ying bellowed, “Who asked you to capture him? Every minute this Linghu Chong stays alive will only add more stains my unblemished reputation. The earlier he is killed, the earlier I can vent my resentment.”

“Your highness…,” Zu Qianqiu stumbled over his words.

“I see. You’ve developed good friendship with Linghu Chong and simply don’t want to handle this for me. That’s fine. I’ll ask somebody else to spread the word,” Ying-Ying said with chill in her tone.

Noticing the graveness in her voice, the three had no choice but to bow in compliance. “Your command is our wish, your highness!” they replied in unison.

But Old Man thought to himself, “Young Master Linghu is a man with kindheartedness and justice. Today I have an order from the Sacred Lady and have no choice but to kill him. But after I do so, I shall commit suicide to accompany him on his way to the underworld.” He took the pill out from his chest pocket and then placed it on the ground.

The three of them turned around and set off. Gradually, their receding figures grew more distant and eventually merged into the dark shades of the night.

Linghu Chong cast a sideway look at Ying-Ying, finding her contemplating silently with her head down. “She wants me dead in order to preserve her reputation. How hard could that be?” he thought to himself.

“If you want me dead, you can just take care of it yourself. Why stir up so many people?” Linghu Chong asked as he unsheathed his long sword slowly, turning it and then handed it over, sword handle first.

Taking the long sword, Ying-Ying turned her head slightly and then fixed her stare at Linghu Chong, who straightened his back and burst into a laugh.

“Your end is imminent. Why are you still laughing?” Ying-Ying asked.

“That’s exactly why I am laughing – my end is finally coming,” Linghu Chong replied.

Raising the long sword, Ying-Ying recoiled her arm in an attacking posture, ready to strike out, but suddenly she turned on her heels and with a strong wave of her arm, threw the long sword in the air. The blade shined profoundly from the reflection of the dim starlight as it flew across the darkness, and with a clank, fell to the ground in a distance.

“It’s all your fault!” Ying-Ying stamped her feet on the ground hysterically. “It’s all your fault that so many people are laughing at me, as though that nobody…nobody will ever want me for the rest…the rest of my life, and I am trying every possible way to make you like me. What…what’s so terrific about you? How can I ever see another person without feeling ashamed of myself?”

Linghu Chong let out another laugh.

“And you are still laughing at me? Mocking me?” Ying-Ying yelled heatedly. Suddenly, with a loud cry, she broke down in tears.

Linghu Chong immediately felt sorry as tender affections rising in his heart. He suddenly came to realization. “She has very high status in the Martial World, with the many people always holding her in awe and veneration. Then of course she has a very sensitive pride. Besides, she is a girl, and girls are always born shy. Now when suddenly everybody says that she fell in love with me, it’s only natural that she becomes very displeased. She told Old Man and the rest to spread the word only to refute a rumor. She didn’t really want me dead. Once everyone hears what she said, of course no one would believe that we are a couple, and the rumor would have no ground.”

At that thought, he spoke softly, “It is really my fault, causing damage to your clean name, Miss! I’ll be on my way. Goodbye.”

“Where are you going?” Ying-Ying wiped the tears off her eyes with her sleeve and asked.

“Anywhere my legs bring me to,” Linghu Chong answered.

“But you promised to escort me. How can you just walk away like that?”

“I must have had an inflated opinion of my abilities to say words like that. I’ve really made a fool out of myself in front of you, Miss. With such outstanding Kung Fu skills you really have no need for any protection. Even one hundred Linghu Chong putting together would be no match for you,” Linghu Chong answered with a smile, and as soon as the last word left his mouth, he had already turned on his heels to walk away.

“You can’t go!” Ying-Ying yelled hastily.

“Why is that?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Zu Qianqiu and the other two have already set out to spread the word out. It will only take a few days for it to become publicly known. Then everybody will be on your heels trying to kill you. It will be like walking on thorns every step of the way. You wouldn’t be able to escape the fatal disaster even if you are

perfectly fit, much less when you are so badly injured."

"Linghu Chong dying from Miss's words, that's fine," Linghu Chong grinned indifferently.

He walked over to pick up the long sword on the ground and then shoved it back into its sheath. Feeling pretty sure that he would not be able to climb up the slope, he decided to walk alongside the mountain gully.

"Hey, stop! You!" seeing that Linghu Chong was walking further and further, Ying-Ying ran after him, shouting.

"It will only bring you trouble if Linghu Chong stays with Miss. It will be much better if I leave by myself," Linghu Chong said.

"You…you…," Ying-Ying muttered, biting her lip hard, feeling the distraction growing inside her by the second. Seeing that Linghu Chong simply would not stop walking away, she ran a few steps closer and then uttered, "Linghu Chong, you just want to force me to say it myself, don't you?"

"What? I don't understand?" Linghu Chong asked in surprise.

Ying-Ying bit her lip again and finally said, "I asked Zu Qianqiu and the group to spread the word, because I want you…I want you to stay by my side forever, and never leave me." After these words, she trembled so frantically as though she could collapse any moment.

"You…you want to be with me?" Linghu Chong stood in amazement.

"Yes! After Zu Qianqiu and the other two spread the word out, you can only stay alive if you stay by my side. Who would have thought you didn't care about your life any bit and were not afraid at all. Wouldn't that…wouldn't that have done you for good?"

"So you do care for me very much, but just wouldn't admit any of it in front of those other fellows," Linghu Chong thought to himself as a stream of gratitude washed over him.

He turned around and walked next to her, holding both of her hands into his own. Ying-Ying's hands were icy cold; Linghu Chong could feel that both her

palms were covered in cold sweats.

"Your hands are cold." Linghu Chong said gently.

"I am afraid," Ying-Ying answered.

"What are you afraid of?"

"I am afraid this fool right here won't listen to me and would rather risk his life out there. I am afraid that you might not even make it to the end of tomorrow and end up dying under those worthless, rotten lowlifes' murderous hands."

"They are all courageous and straightforward guys who respect you very much. Why do you despise them so much?" Linghu Chong sighed.

"They laugh at me behind my back and they want to kill you. Wouldn't that make them rotten lowlifes?" Ying-Ying argued.

"But it was you who had ordered them to kill me. How can you blame this on them?" Linghu Chong could not hold his grin back. "Moreover, they never laughed at you behind your back? Remember when Ji Wushi, Old Man, and Zu Qianqiu mentioned in their conversation, how respectful they were in their tones? What made you think they were laughing at you behind your back?"

"They weren't laughing on their faces, but they were laughing in their guts."

Hearing the girl persist unreasonably, Linghu Chong found it hard to refute, so he said, "All right! If you don't allow me to leave, I'll stay here and be your company. Alas, it probably wouldn't feel that great to be chopped into pieces."

"Wouldn't feel great? You'll feel awful," Ying-Ying replied, feeling wild with joy to hear Linghu Chong agree to stay.

She turned her face to the side when she spoke these words, and illuminated under the dim starlight of the night, the snow-white face seemed to be glowing in a soft radiance. Linghu Chong felt a tickle in his heart.

"This girl in fact is much more beautiful than the little apprentice sister, and she treats me with great care and affection. But…but…why couldn't I forget

little apprentice sister even for a single moment?" he thought to himself.

But Ying-Ying had no idea that he was thinking of Yue Lingshan. "Where's the zither I gave you? You lost it, didn't you?" she said.

"That's right! I ran out of money on the way, so I pawned the zither in the pawnshop for some silver," Linghu Chong answered as he took off the pack on his back, opened it, and then took out the short zither.

Ying-Ying could see the tight wrap around the zither in the pack. Knowing that Linghu Chong had always treasured this present from hers, she was very pleased.

"How many lies do you have to make everyday to make yourself happy?" she reproved.

Getting the zither from Linghu Chong, she gave a few plucks to the strings, and then began playing that "Song of Peace and Serenity."

"Have you learned the entire piece yet?' she asked.

"Far from that!" Linghu Chong answered.

Quietly, he listened to the gentler zither sounds, feeling relaxed and joyful. After a while, he noticed that the notes of music were quite different from the ones she had played in the Bamboo-Green Alley in Luoyang. Now they almost sounded like chirps from birds on top of the branches or spurt from mountain strings, with continuous jingles and tinkles, sounding very interesting and pleasant.

"Same melody, but different notes. So this 'Song of Peace and Serenity' can have so many variations," he thought.

Suddenly a loud ring echoed as the shortest string of the zither broke in half. Ying-Ying frowned but continued to play. But only minutes later, another string snapped. Linghu Chong could sense much fidgety carried in the zither play, which were totally contrary to the intention the music was supposed to depict. Before he had any success to think it through, another crack echoed as a third string snapped in half.

“You sit right next to me and keep disturbing me. How can I play the zither well like that?” Pushing the zither aside, Ying-Ying protested.

“I’ve been sitting here very quietly since the beginning. When did I ever disturb her?” Linghu Chong thought to himself. But he figured it out right away. “So she could not find peace of mind and she is blaming that on me.”

He didn’t even try to argue, and simply lay down on the meadow in repose with his eyes closed. Soon his fatigue caught up with him and before he knew it, he had fell asleep.

By the time he woke again, it was already the next day. He looked around and then found Ying-Ying washing her face on her knees by the mountain gully. He watched on as Ying-Ying began combing her hair after she finished washing her face. The skin on her arms was so white as though the arms were made out of pure jade, and the beautiful long hair almost touched the ground. The picture was so beautiful that Linghu Chong forgot about everything else and just sat there, watching in a daze.

Ying-Ying looked back over her shoulder and then blushed when she found Linghu Chong gazing at her in a trance.

“Lazy bum! Getting up so late!” she grinned.

“I’ll go catch some frogs. Let’s see if I’ve build up enough strength,” feeling quite embarrassed to be caught gazing at her, Linghu Chong uttered awkwardly.

“Why don’t you stay lying down and rest some more? I’ll go catch some,” Ying-Ying suggested.

Linghu Chong struggled to get back onto his feet, but all his limbs were sore and limp, and the energy streams inside him seethed the moment he tried to use his strength.

“Either let me die or let me live,” Linghu Chong thought to himself, feeling very irritated. “Staying half dead and half alive like this, I am pretty much a good-for-nothing. Even I am disgusted with myself, not mentioning how others would think of me as a complete nuisance.”

“Your internal injuries might not be so hard to heal. This is a very secluded area. We have nothing else, anyway. You can just let time take it’s course and let the wounds heal slowly. There’s no need to be impatient,” noticing the displeased expression on Linghu Chong’s face, Ying-Ying comforted him.

The valley the gully flow through was located in a remote section of the mountain range. Ever since the night when Ji Wushi and the rest of the group passed by, no one else ever showed up. The two of them lived in the valley for almost a fortnight. Ying-Ying’s internal wounds had healed early on, and every day she would pick wild fruit and catch wild frogs for food, but Linghu Chong only became thinner and thinner as days go by. She forced him to take the pill left by Great Master Fang-Sheng, and played the zither for him everyday to help him fall asleep, but these did not seem to have an effect on his injuries. Linghu Chong knew that his final day would be coming soon, but having always been open-minded all his life, he did not let that bother him, and kept talking and joking with Ying-Ying every day. Although Ying-Ying had always been arrogant and willful before, at the thought that Linghu Chong could be suddenly gone any moment now, she became even more gentle and soft, docile and obedient, and attended upon Linghu Chong with all her heart. Even at times when she got angry over trifles occasionally, she would immediately regret it and apologize to him.

One day after eating two peaches, Linghu Chong was exhausted already, and soon, he fell asleep. In the ooziness, he heard the sound of somebody sobbing. Opening his eyes slightly, he found Ying-Ying bending over by his side sobbing uncontrollably. Stunned, Linghu Chong was just about to ask the reason for her grief when he stumbled across the answer, “She knows that I am dying. That’s why she is so grieved.”

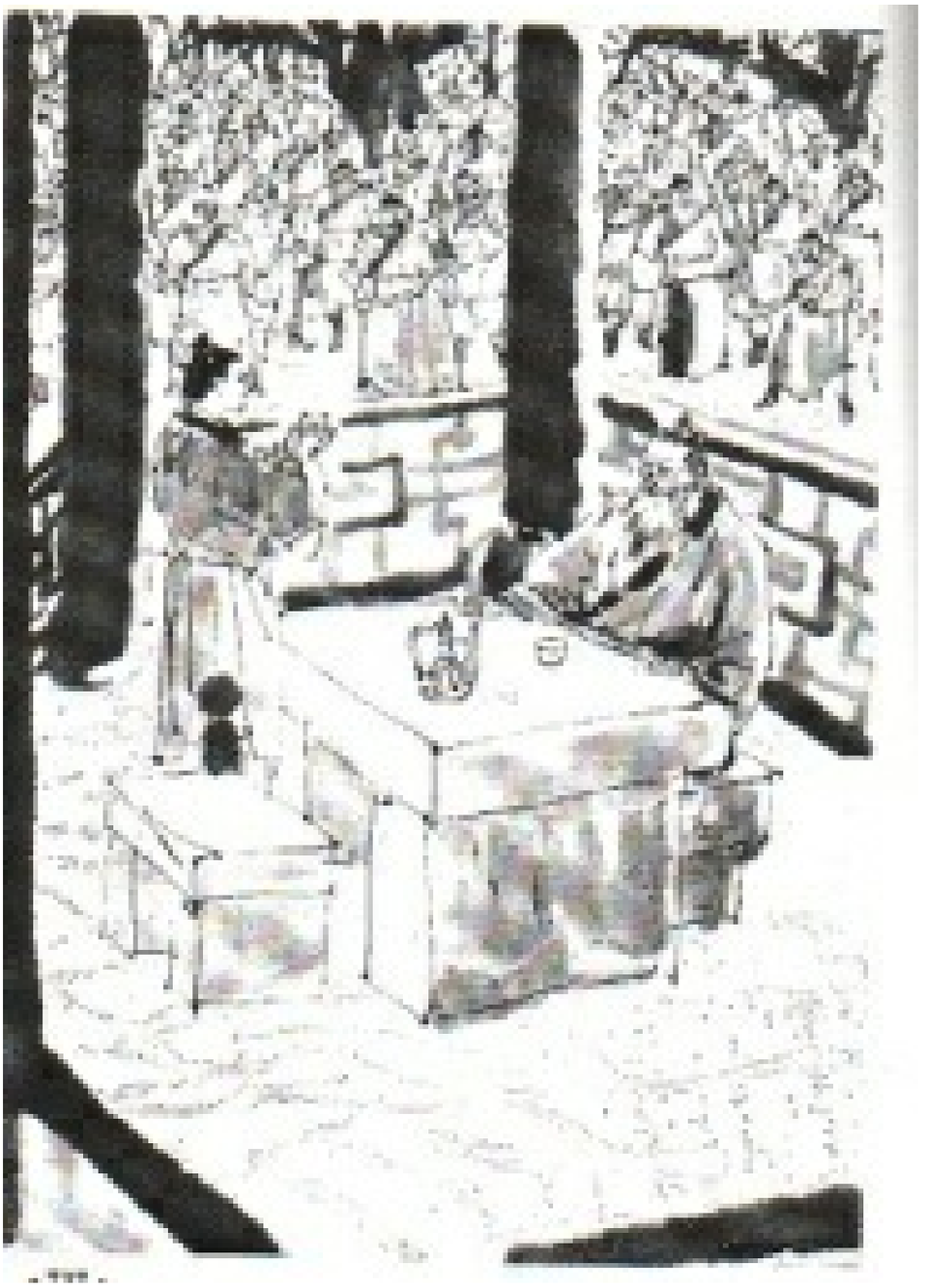
“Don’t cry! Don’t cry! I can live for at least another eighty years. I am not leaving this world in any hurry,” reaching out his left hand, he stroked her beautiful hair and said with a forced smile.

“You are getting thinner and thinner every day. I…I…I don’t want to live anymore…,” Ying-Ying whimpered.

Linghu Chong could feel the utter sincerity and deep sorrow in her voice, and immense gratitude immediately filled his heart. A strong surge of warmth suddenly shot up his throat, and blood immediately gushed out of his mouth. The entire world seemed to have started to swirl around him, and before he knew it, he lost consciousness.

Chapter 18: Collaboration

Translated by Lanny Lin



The old man turned his head back and glared at Linghu Chong coldly. With a trace of surprise shown on his face, he snorted. Linghu Chong raised his cup. "Please!" he said.

During the next many days, Linghu Chong remained in a coma. Occasionally, he would regain slight consciousness, feeling as though his body was drifting high in the clouds, before slipping right back into the coma only moments later. Sometimes, it felt as if someone was forcing water down his throat, while some other times, he felt as though his entire body had been roasted on fire. Not only couldn’t he move a muscle in his arms or legs, he didn’t even have any strength

to open his eyes.

Then, one day, when he was finally in his right mind, he felt someone grabbing tightly around his wrists and infusing two streams of burning hot energy into his body, each through an acupoint on one of his wrist. And instantly, they clashed and collided fiercely with the streams of energy already inside his body. Feeling the ineffable pain, he opened his mouth and cry out loud, yet no sound came out of it, while the pain only worsened as though he was experiencing the combination of all tortures known to mankind at the same time.

This went on and on. In his ooziness, Linghu Chong didn't know how many days passed by like that; all he knew was that every time after more inner energy was infused inside him, the excruciating pain and suffering would reduce slightly compared to the last time. Eventually his brain began to function normally once again and it didn't take him long to figure out that someone with very resourceful inner power must have been working on him, curing his internal injuries.

"Could Master and Master-Wife have found a senior grandmaster to save my life?" he thought, "But where did Ying-Ying go? And where are Master and Master-Wife? How about little apprentice sister?" As soon as the thought of little apprentice sister came into his mind, the energy flow in his chest seethed hysterically, and he lost consciousness instantaneously.

Thus everyday, someone came and infused more inner energy into his body, and at last the day came when he was much more clear-headed and was able to open his mouth to speak.

"Many…many thanks to the senior master! Where…where am I?"

He opened his eyes slowly, and then took in the glimpse of a much-crinkled face, which smiled gently at him. This face looked very familiar. Still in a daze, Linghu Chong gazed at him to take a better look, and before long he noticed that there was no hair on the man's head, only burning scars from incense sticks[58] – the man was a Buddhist monk. The indistinct image of a man came to his mind.

“You…you are Great…Great Master…Fang,” he muttered.

“Very good! Very good! You can recognize me now. I am Fang-Sheng,” the old monk replied in a smile, looking utterly gratified.

“Yeah, yeah! You are Great Master Fang-Sheng,” Linghu Chong repeated.

By then, he had just realized that he was inside a small room. A small oil lamp on the table lit the room with dim yellowish glow, and he was lying on bed under a cotton-padded quilt.

“How do you feel?” Fang-Sheng asked.

“I feel better now. Where…where am I?” Linghu Chong asked.

“You are inside the Shaolin Temple,” Fang-Sheng answered.

“I…I am inside the Shaolin Temple? Where’s Ying-Ying? How did I come to the Shaolin Temple?” Linghu Chong asked in amazement.

“You have only regained your consciousness a moment ago. It would be wise to restrain your thoughts so as to not exhaust yourself and to avoid any possibility of relapse. Everything can wait till later.” Fang-Sheng smiled.

Henceforth, Fang-Sheng would come to the small room everyday to work on Linghu Chong’s injuries using his own inner energy, once in the morning and once in the evening. A fortnight later, Linghu Chong was already able to sit up and eat, drink without any help. But every time when he asked about the whereabouts of Ying-Ying and how he had ended up in the temple, Fang-Sheng would not answer but only smile.

One day, after Fang-Sheng had infused his inner energy into Linghu Chong’s body, he said, “Young hero Linghu, by now, your life has been temporarily preserved, but the old monk’s Kung Fu is only limited and still could not dissolve the heterogeneous energy streams inside your body. At the moment any deferral would count as a gain. But I am afraid that within the period of one year, your internal injuries would have a relapse, and by then, even the Buddha, himself, would not be able to save you.”

“Ping One-Finger, Dr. Ping, told me the same thing that very day. Great Master

has done his utmost to cure me, and I can never be thankful enough to what Great Master has done for me. The lifespan of any man is his destiny. Even if Great Master had greater inner energy, you wouldn't have been able to turn Heaven's will." Linghu Chong nodded.

"We members of the Buddhist order only believe in Karma, not Heaven's will." Fang-Sheng shook his head. "I've already told you that day when we first met that the Abbot of our temple, senior apprentice brother Fang-Zheng, has profound inner power. If he finds you a part of his Karma and is willing to teach you the secret of the Tendon-Altering Sutra, then even one's tendons and muscles can be altered, much less dissolving heterogeneous energy inside. I'll bring you to pay a formal visit to the Abbot. I hope you will answer him wisely."

Linghu Chong had long heard of the grand name of the Shaolin Temple Abbot, Great Master Fang-Zheng. "Thank you very much for introducing me, Great Master," he said joyously. "Even if it's not in my Karma for Great Master Abbot to look upon me with favor, just being able to pay a visit to this accomplished hierarch of the present age is already good luck that is hard to come by."

Slowly, he got off the bed, dressed himself, and then followed Great Master Fang-Sheng out of the small room.

As soon as he stepped out of the small room, he was bathed in the warm and dazzling sunshine. It almost felt as though he had just entered into another world, and his spirit soared. Still feeling sore and limp in his legs, he walked in slow paces and looked around along the way. The temple had many hall buildings, and each of the hall buildings looked majestic and magnificent. They met many monks on their way, and every time far before they even got there, those monks would move out of the way and bow to Fang-Sheng with their palms together in a Buddhist greeting, holding him in reverence and sticking to etiquette. After walking through three long corridors, they arrived outside a stone building.

"Fang-Sheng requests an audience with apprentice brother Abbot," Fang-

Sheng said to the young Buddhist novice standing outside of the building.

The young Buddhist novice went inside to report and soon returned.

“Abbot is happy to have your presence,” he said, putting his palms together in greeting.

Linghu Chong followed Fang-Sheng and entered the building. Then a short, old monk sitting on a cattail hassock in the middle caught his attention.

“Fang-Sheng here shows his respect to apprentice brother Abbot, and I’d like you to meet the Head Apprentice of the Huashan School, young hero Linghu Chong,” Fang-Sheng bowed and saluted.

Linghu Chong knelt down on his knees right away and kowtowed respectfully. Abbot Fang-Zheng raised himself slightly and extended his right arm in greeting.

“Young hero, no need for excessive courtesy. Please sit down.”

After Linghu Chong finished kowtowing, he took a seat on the cattail hassock to the right of Fang-Sheng and shot another glance at Abbot Fang-Zheng. The man had a thin face with a kind and amiable look, which gave no indication as to how old the man really was.

“Who would have thought that this so well-known hierarch looks so mediocre? Without prior knowledge, who would have believed that he turns out to be the Head Master of the Number One martial arts school in the entire Martial World?” Linghu Chong thought to himself secretly. Then he heard Great Master Fang-Sheng’s voice.

“After the last three months of nursing and nourishing, young hero Linghu is feeling much better now.”

“Did I stay in a coma for over three months? I thought it was only twenty some days.” Linghu Chong thought to himself, feeling astounded.

“Excellent,” Fang-Zheng replied. Turning his head toward Linghu Chong, he said, “Young hero Linghu, your respectful master Mr. Yue, the Head Master of the Huashan School, is an upright man who never stoop to flattery. His clean

fame is well known to the entire Martial World. I've always admired him very much."

"Thank you for your kind words!" Linghu Chong stood up and bowed. "I had been unconscious due to my severe injuries, and I owe a great debt of gratitude to Great Master Fang-Sheng for saving my life. But I had no idea that three month have passed. May I ask you if my Master and Master-Wife are well?"

Even though that he shouldn't have asked an outsider about the well being of his own Master and Master-Wife, feeling very concerned about them, he still couldn't help but ask.

"I heard that Mr. Yue, Madam Yue, and the Huashan apprentices are in the Fujian Province at this moment," Fang-Zheng replied.

"Many thanks, Great Master Abbot!" Linghu Chong felt relieved right away. But then immediately after, a feeling of sadness welled up in this heart. "So Master and Master-Wife have brought little apprentice sister to apprentice brother Lin's home at last," he thought to himself.

"Young hero Linghu, please sit down," Fang-Zheng said gently. "Apprentice brother Fang-Sheng told me that young hero showed most excellent sword art skills and has truly mastered the skills taught by Grandmaster Feng of Huashan. That is so gratifying."

"You flatter me," Linghu Chong answered.

"Grandmaster Feng has lived in seclusion for many years. I had thought that the venerable grandmaster had passed away. It is such pleasure to hear that he is still with us in this world," Fang-Zheng said.

"Yes!" Linghu Chong acknowledged.

"Young hero, after you had your injuries, your healer had gone about the wrong way in curing you, leaving the many conflicting energy streams inside you that can not be easily dissolved. Apprentice brother Fang-Sheng has explained all these to me. After careful consideration, I came to realization that only after you begin training in the secret Kung Fu of our school, the Tendon

Altering Sutra, will you be able to use your own internal power to dissolve them gradually. If we use any external source of inner energy and force it upon young hero's body, it would be like drinking poison to quench thirst and cause more suffering. For the last three months, apprentice brother Fang-Sheng used his own inner energy to extend your life. But after he infused his inner energy into your body, he had only added another heterogeneous energy stream inside you. If you try gathering your inner energy, you'll see what I mean."

Linghu Chong gave it a try, and just as Fang-Zheng had said, he immediately felt waves of inner energy surging inside his lower stomach, clash with each other, completely out of his control. Agonizing pain soon swept over him, his body trembling wildly as cold sweats streamed down his forehead.

"The old Buddhist monk is so incompetent and only caused young hero more pain and suffering," Fang-Sheng said apologetically, putting his palms together.

"Please don't say that, Great Master," Linghu Chong replied hurriedly. "For my well being, you worked with all your heart and did everything you could do, exhausting precious inner energy of your own that took a long time to cultivate. I have only been granted a new lease of life thanks to Great Master's kindness."

"I really don't deserve that," said Fang-Sheng. "Grandmaster Feng granted me great benevolence many years ago. What I did couldn't even repay a fraction of my debt of gratitude to Grandmaster Feng."

At these words, Fang-Zheng held up his head.

"Why haven't you ascended the meanings of benevolence and rancor? Benevolence is Karma while rancor is also Karma. Rancor should not be persisted in while benevolence need not be persisted in, either. All things in the mortal world are as transient as a fleeting cloud. There is no benevolence or rancor after death."[59]

"Yes, many thanks for the advice, senior apprentice brother," Fang-Sheng answered.

"We members of the Buddhist order believe that compassion is the principle of life, so with the knowledge of young hero's internal injuries, we will aid to the

best we can," Fang-Zheng said slowly. "The divine art of the Tendon Altering Sutra was written by the venerable Bodhidharma,[60] the First Ancestor of the Zen Sect of Mahayana in the East Region, and inherited by the Second Ancestor of the Zen sect, Great Master Hui-Ke. Great Master Hui-Ke had a previous Buddhist name called Shen-Guang. He was from Luoyang. Having been an expert in the Doctrine of Confucius and Mencius since young, he was especially proficient in understanding profound theories. At the time when First Ancestor Bodhidharma resided in the Xiben Temple, Great Master Shen-Guang went to the temple to make an application for increase. Seeing that Great Master Shen-Guang had been studying heterogeneously with many preconceived ideas rooted deeply and was too self-assured, which would make a great obstacle in learning the true ideas of Zen, First Ancestor Bodhidharma refused him at once. Great Master Shen-Guang entreated for a long time, yet still could not cross the threshold, so he drew his sword and chopped his own left arm off."

Linghu Chong uttered a cry of shock, thinking to himself, "That was some fortitude Great Master Shen-Guang had shown in search of Buddhist principles and truths."

"His whole heartedness finally moved First Ancestor Bodhidharma," Fang-Zheng continued, "who accepted him as his student and renamed him to Hui-Ke. Thus, Second Ancestor Hui-Ke was able to inherit the mantle of First Ancestor Bodhidharma and carry on the teaching of Zen principles. What the Second Ancestor had learned from the First Ancestor Bodhidharma was the correct reason of the Buddhist doctrine, using the teaching in the Lankavatara Sutra for introspection and for realizing one's nature. Even though the name of our school's martial arts skills is widely known, it is, in fact, only a superficial study that is extremely insignificant. First Ancestor Bodhidharma only taught his apprentices ways to strength and invigorate their bodies. When the body is strengthened, the mind becomes clever, and when the mind becomes clever, the easier it is to comprehend. But many later disciples often became infatuated with martial arts, so as to attend to trifles and neglect the essentials, therefore, gave no consideration to the original purpose of First Ancestor's martial arts teaching. Pity, what a pity!"

At that word, Fang-Zheng shook his head again and again with emotion. After a long pause, he finally went on.

"After First Ancestor passed away and returned to Heaven, Second Ancestor stumped upon a volume of Buddhist scripture by First Ancestor's cattail hassock, and that was the Tendon Altering Sutra. This volume had very abstruse argumentation and principles, and even after Second Ancestor studied it assiduously, he still could not understand it. But he knew that if First Ancestor Bodhidharma had left this volume of scripture next to the stonewall after nine years of strict meditation it simply had to be extraordinary, even though it had few words. So Second Ancestor traveled all over many famous mountains and peaks in search of well-accomplished and eminent monks who could understand the true significance within. But at the time, Second Ancestor, himself, was already a well-accomplished and eminent monk. Even he couldn't understand the scripture after cudgeling his brain, it was only harder to try to find someone with even higher intelligence and more profound understanding than him. Hence, for twenty years, Second Ancestor searched in vain, and the mystery in the volume of scripture remained unsolved. One day, with the ultimate Karma, Second Ancestor was able to meet an Indian monk named Bancimidi on Mount Emei in Szechwan, and when they discussed Buddhist studies, they were congenial to each other. So Second Ancestor took out the Tendon Altering Sutra and studied intensively together with Bancimidi on top of the Golden Peak of Mount Emei. The two eminent Buddhist monks enlightened and inspired each other a great deal and were able to gain a thorough understanding after forty-nine days."

"Merciful Buddha! Thank Buddha!" putting his palms together, Fang-Sheng praised.

"But what Great Master Bancimidi explained were mostly theories of Zen. It was after another twelve years, when Second Ancestor chanced upon a young martial arts expert in the city of Chang-An and after a thorough discussion that lasted three days and three nights, was he able to apprehend the profound martial arts theories in the Tendon Altering Sutra to the full extent." After a

pause, he said, “And that young man was none other than Li Jing, who was made Wei-Lord for rendering his outstanding service to the founding of the Tang Dynasty and later assisting Emperor Tai-Zong in putting down the Turks rebellion. Wei-Lord Li’s exceptional achievements probably will also have to be attributed to the benefits he received from reading the Tendon Altering Sutra.”

“Wow,” Linghu Chong muttered as he thought to himself, “Turned out the Tendon Altering Sutra had such historical background.”

Fang-Zheng continued, “The Tendon Altering Sutra Kung Fu utilizes all the channels, passages of one’s body and bonds the spirits of the five internal organs. Comprehensive yet does not disperse, cycling through yet incessant. Energy originates from the within, while blood nourishes from the outside. Once the practitioner masters the Tendon Altering Sutra Kung Fu, power can be launched at a change of thought. The assembly and the release become part of a natural course, and complete themselves without conscious commands, just like the rising of the tide or the exploding of the thunder. Young hero, once one masters the Tendon Altering Sutra, it is almost like a small boat floating among gigantic waves of the ocean. When the angry waves surge about, the small boat naturally moves high and low accordingly, never makes an effort. Even if the boat had wanted to make an effort, where would the strength be coming from and where would the strength be used upon?”

Linghu Chong nodded again and again, knowing that the principle in the metaphor was broad and deep, and was also interlinked with the sword art theory Feng Qingyang had explained to him before.

“Just because the Tendon Altering Sutra contains such immense power, in the last several hundred years, it has not been taught to anyone except the right ones and the ones who had the Karma,” Fang-Zheng went on. “Without the blessed Karma, even outstanding and exceptional members of our own school can not be taught the secret of the sutra. Junior apprentice brother Fang-Sheng would make a good example. He already has high Kung Fu skills, and has always held his abstains rigorously. An outstanding disciple of our school he is, indeed. Yet, our Master didn’t teach him anything from the sutra.”

“Yes. Linghu Chong does not have such blessed Karma. I dare not ask for it absurdly,” Linghu Chong replied.

“Not so. Young hero is one with the Karma.” Fang-Zheng shook his head.

A mixed feeling of shock and delight surged in Linghu Chong’s chest. His heart thumped heavily, and he couldn’t believe that he actually was one with the Karma for this ultimate Kung Fu of the Shaolin School when eminent monks such as Great Master Fang-Sheng didn’t even have the fortune to learn it.

“The Buddha opens his wisdom to the vast audiences, but only ones with the Karma can attain the truth,” Fang-Zheng spoke slowly. “Young hero is the disciple of the venerable Grandmaster Feng – that is the one element of the Karma; young hero ended up coming to our Shaolin Temple – that is another element of the Karma; young hero will die unless he studies the Tendon Altering Sutra while apprentice brother Fang-Sheng could benefit from learning the sutra but wouldn’t suffer from not learning the sutra, either, and the difference in between is yet one more element of the Karma.”

“Young hero Linghu is blessed with the ultimate fortune. Fang-Sheng is gratified for you,” Fang-Sheng said, putting his palms together in a Buddhist greeting.

“Junior apprentice brother,” Fang-Zheng said, “it is in your nature that you always persist in things. You have never been able to see through the ultimate principle in the three ways of vimukta: ‘Void, Markless, and Non-action,’ thus not able to overcome the barrier of understanding the true meaning of life and death. It’s not that I am not willing to teach you the Tendon Altering Sutra. I am only afraid that once you start training in this superior Kung Fu, you will become infatuated with it, hence neglect the proper duties of Buddhist meditation.”

“Thank you, senior apprentice brother for the edification.” A look of anxiety appeared on Fang-Sheng’s face as he stood up and spoke in an utterly respectful voice.

Fang-Zheng nodded slightly to show his encouragement. He waited for a good

while until a smile crept back onto Fang-Sheng's lips before giving another nod and letting a small smile blossom on his own face. Turning his head toward Linghu Chong, he spoke again.

"There was originally a significant obstacle in this matter, but this obstacle no longer stood in our way. Even since First Ancestor Bodhidharma, this Tendon Altering Sutra was only taught to members of the Shaolin School, never anyone outside. I cannot let this stipulation end in my hands. That's why young hero must join the Shaolin School of Mount Songshan and become a laymen apprentice of the Shaolin School." After a short pause, he spoke again, "If young hero does not find the old monk loathsome, then you can become an apprentice of mine as a member of the 'Guo' class. You can change your name to Linghu Guochong."

"Congratulations, young hero," Fang-Sheng uttered a cry of joy. "Senior apprentice brother has only taken in two apprentices all his life, and that happened over thirty years ago. As the final apprentice of apprentice brother Abbot, not only would you be able to learn the superior Kung Fu of the Tendon Altering Sutra, the twelve consummate Shaolin Skills my apprentice brother is expert in, can also be passed down to you according to your abilities. By then, young hero will certainly be able to brighten the name of our school and add an extraordinary splendor to the Martial World."

"Great Master Abbot, I can't be thankful enough to your great kindness. But I am already an apprentice of the Huashan School and it would be inappropriate for me to join another school and study under a new Master," Linghu Chong stood up and replied respectfully.

"Well, that is exactly the significant obstacle I had just mentioned." Fang-Zheng let out a slight smile. "Young hero, you probably don't know it yet, but you are no longer an apprentice of the Huashan School."

Linghu Chong was thunderstruck. "Why…why…why do you say that I am no longer an apprentice of the Huashan School?" His voice trembled as he spoke.

"Young hero, please take a look at this," taking a letter out from his sleeve

pocket, Fang-Zheng answered. He gave his palm a gentle wave, and the letter glided toward Linghu Chong in a straight line.

As soon as Linghu Chong caught the letter in his hands, a shock shot down his spine. Gasping with astonishment, he couldn't help but think, "This Great Master Abbot has fathomless inner energy, indeed. Even with just a thin letter was he able to pass over such vigorous inner energy. How amazing!"

Looking down at the letter in his hands, he saw the red seal on the envelope that carried the words "Seal of the Huashan School Head Master." There were also characters in the middle of the envelope that said, "To Great Master Abbot of the Shaolin School." These characters were written with an upright form in a dignified style, and were precisely the handwriting of his Master, Yue Buqun. Faintly feeling a foreboding sensation, he drew the letter out with trembling hands and read it. The sinking feeling in his stomach settled in as he read on, not able to believe that this would ever happen. After reading it the second time, he suddenly felt everything around him began spinning uncontrollably, and before he knew it, he had already collapsed to the floor with a loud thump. By the time he woke up again, he found himself in the arms of Great Master Fang-Sheng. Struggled back to his feet, Linghu Chong couldn't help but break into a loud cry.

"May I ask the reason for young hero's sorrow? Had any mishap happened to your respectful master?" Fang-Sheng asked.

"Great Master, please take a look," handing the letter to Fang-Sheng, Linghu Chong muttered, choking with sobs.

Taking the letter from Linghu Chong, Fang-Sheng took a good look at the letter, which said:

"Yue Buqun, the Head Master of the Huashan School, here presents his greetings to the Head Master of the Shaolin School: As the Head Master of the Huashan School with unmerited reputation, I have not being sending my regards to your highness, so as not to disturb your peace. This letter is in regard to the defiant apprentice of our school, Linghu Chong, who, with the disobedient

character, had been repeatedly breaking school rules and even took up with evildoers and associated with brigands. Buqun must have been an inept Master, because even after strict reprimands and stern punishments, I still failed to show effect. In order to uphold the righteousness of the Martial World and the clean name of an orthodox school, I hereby expel the defiant apprentice Linghu Chong from the Huashan School. From now on, this defiant apprentice is no longer a member of our school. If he continues to collude with evil and bring calamity to the world, I request all friends of the orthodox schools to eliminate him with no mercy. With great anxiety and shame, I am writing this letter, and the words could not express my feelings to the full extent. I wish for your forgiveness."

This also took Fang-Sheng by great surprise. He wanted to comfort Linghu Chong but failed to find any words. Giving the letter back to Fang-Zheng, he took a glance at Linghu Chong, whose face was now covered with streams of tears, and heaved a long sigh.

"Alas, young hero, you really shouldn't have affiliated with members of the Dark-Wood Cliff."

"Every Head Master of the orthodox schools must have received similar letters from your respectful master and have already informed all their members. Even if you were perfectly fit, as soon as you walk out of this door, it will be like walking on thorns every step of the way, and all members of the orthodox schools will consider you a fatal enemy," Fang-Zheng spoke again.

These words stunned Linghu Chong. He immediately remembered hearing similar words from Ying-Ying by the mountain gully. By now, not only all the heterodox school members would be on his heels with a mission to kill him, all the orthodox school members would also consider him a fatal enemy. As vast as the world under heaven was, there seemed to have not a place he could shelter himself. Then he remembered the deep love of Master and Master-Wife, who could almost be considered his foster parents. They not only taught him Kung Fu, but also brought him up from a child. But he had been willful and committed all kinds of outrages, which ultimately caused his expulsion from the

Huashan School. He could imagine in his mind how Master must have felt more pain and sorrow than him when he wrote these letters. Feeling of grief and shame welled in his heart; he almost itched to just bump his head against a wall to kill himself.

Out of his tear-filled eyes, he could vaguely make out the expression of deep pity on Fang-Zheng and Fang-Sheng's faces, and suddenly he remembered something: Liu Zhengfeng wanted to have his Gold Basin Hand Washing ceremony so he could quit the Martial World, but only because he had taken up with the Demon's Cult Elder Qu Yang, he ended up dying under the Songshan School's sword. It was obvious that Righteousness and Evil were not irreconcilable. Even someone as powerful and prestigious as Liu Zhengfeng could not escape the fatal destiny, much less he, an isolated young man not worth mentioning and without any help, let alone the fact that the Five-Tyrant Ridge gathering of heresy could only be worse.

"The sea of bitterness has no boundaries, if one only turns his head, there is the shore," Fang-Zheng said slowly. "As long as one awakes to his errors, even if he were an unpardonably wicked person, Buddha will not turn his back to him. You are still young, and only took a wrong step in life for a moment and affiliated with the wrong kind of people mistakenly. That's not to say that you won't be able to make a fresh start. Your affiliation with the Huashan School has made a thorough break. Henceforth, as a member of our Shaolin School, you can thoroughly rectify your errors and be reborn again. I am sure it's not likely that someone in the Martial World would want to make trouble for you." He had spoken these words in a very casual manner, yet these words showed a sign of stateliness.

"Right now I have nowhere to go," Linghu Chong thought to himself. "If I rely upon the Shaolin School for protection, not only would I be able to learn the superior Kung Fu to save my life, with the prestige of the Shaolin School, indeed, no one would dare to make trouble for Great Master Fang-Zheng's apprentice." But right at the moment, a feeling of unyielding suddenly rose from within his chest. He thought, "If a man cannot even stand on his own feet

between heaven and earth and has to rely upon another school for protection in shame, how can he be called a true man ever again? If the thousands of people in the Martial World want to kill me, so be it. I'll just let them come and kill me. Master doesn't want me anymore and has expelled me from the Huashan School. So what? I'll simply wander about alone by myself."

At that thought, he couldn't help but feeling righteous ardor surging up his throat, making him thirsty. All he wanted to do now was to drink a few dozens of strong liquor, and the thoughts about life, death, school or faction were all cast behind his back. At the instant, even Yue Lingshan, the one he had always borne in mind constantly, seemed to have become a complete stranger. Getting back onto his feet, he knelt down in front of Fang-Zheng and Fang-Sheng and then kowtowed respectfully. Believing that he had made up his mind to join the Shaolin School, Fang-Zheng and Fang-Sheng both revealed a smiling face.

"Since I am not even wanted by my own Master, I am too shamed to join another school. I can't thank the two Great Masters enough for your great kindness and mercy. Please accept my farewell," Linghu Chong stood up and declared in a loud voice.

Fang-Zheng was astounded, having not expected this young man to show no fear of death.

"Young hero, this matter concerns your life and death. Please don't be swayed by personal feelings," Fang-Sheng persuaded sincerely.

But Linghu Chong only replied with a burst of laughter. Turning on his heels, he walked out of the room. With his chest filled with grievance, his steps became unexpectedly nimble, and he went out of the Shaolin Temple in big strides.

As soon as he stepped out of the temple, feeling of desolation welled up in his heart. Looking up into the sky he laughed, thinking, "All the orthodox members consider me a vital enemy, while all the heretical members want to kill me. Linghu Chong most likely won't even make it to the end of the day. I'd like to see who would be the one taking away my life."

He checked his pockets. There was no money in his pocket, no sword by his waistband, and even the short zither given to him as a present by Ying-Ying was nowhere to be seen. It wouldn't have been overstating to say that by then he owned nothing in this world and had not a concern about anything whatsoever.

He began walking down Mount Songshan. At the time of dusk, he was already far from the Shaolin Temple. The walk exhausted him and also made him feel very hungry.

"Where should I go about finding something to eat?" he thought to himself.

Suddenly, sounds of footsteps thumped as seven or eight men ran toward him in quick steps from the west. All of them were dressed up in tight robes, their weapons tying to their backs.

"If you want to kill me, it's better that you attack now, so as to save me the trouble of looking for food. Even if I eat my fill I am going to get killed anyway. Why hold the candle to the sun?" Linghu Chong thought to himself.

Stopping at the middle of the road, he stood, arms akimbo, and shouted, "Linghu Chong is right here! Go ahead! Come and kill me!"

But quite to his surprise, when these men ran by him, they simply cast a quick glance at him before making a detour around him.

"This man is a retard," one man muttered.

"Right! We'd better not let unnecessary incidents delay the more important matter," another man answered.

"It'll be terrible if we let him get away," a third man said.

Only moments later, the group of men had run into the distance.

"Turns out that they are after somebody else," Linghu Chong thought to himself.

Just when the sounds of footsteps from those men finally died down, sounds of hoof beats suddenly rose from the west, and soon five horses galloped by him like a gust of wind. After the horses had dashed out another one hundred

feet or so, one of the horses turned around all of a sudden. The rider was a middle-aged woman.

“Excuse me, mister, you didn’t happen to see an old man in a white robe, did you? He is quite thin and tall, and also carries a scimitar by his waist,” she asked.

“No, I didn’t.” Linghu Chong shook his head.

Without another word, the woman turned the horse around and raced after the other four riders.

“Well, it seems that they are pursuing an old man in a white robe. I don’t have anything to do, anyway. I might as well just go watch the fun,” Linghu Chong thought to himself, and at that thought, he began walking toward the east.

He walked for about half an hour when another group of men, over a dozen of them, caught up with him in a small trot and then went past him.

“Howdy, bro, did you happen to see an old man in a white robe? He is quite thin and tall and has a scimitar by his waist,” a man in his fifties turned his head back and asked.

“No, I didn’t,” Linghu Chong answered.

After another while, when he arrived at a fork in the road, sounds of horse bells[61] rose from the northwest corner as three horses dashed along the road at high speed. All three riders were young men in their twenties.

“Hey, I’ve got a question! Have you seen a…?” the leading rider waved his horsewhip in the air and asked.

“…a thin, tall, old man in a white robe with a scimitar by his waist, right?” Linghu Chong finished the sentence for him.

“That’s right! You know where he is?” all looking utterly joyful, the three asked in unison.

“Sorry, I have not seen him,” Linghu Chong said with a sigh.

The leading rider’s temper hit the roof. “God damn it! Are you making fun of

me? If you haven't seen him, how could you have described him?" he bellowed.

"Why couldn't I know the description before actually seeing him?" Linghu Chong grinned.

The leading young man raised the horsewhip in his hand and was about to whip it at Linghu Chong's head when another young man's voice rose.

"Second brother, don't complicate things. Let's get back to the chase, hurry!"

The young man holding the horsewhip let out a disgruntled snort as he waved the whip and hit the air then rode off together with the other two.

"Why are all these people going after an old man in a white robe. What did he do?" Linghu Chong thought to himself. "To follow them and watch the fun will certainly be entertaining, but if they realize that I am Linghu Chong, I bet they would kill me on the spot." At that thought, feeling of fear started stewing in his chest, but then he thought better of it. "At this stage, both the orthodox schools and the heretic schools want me dead. Dodging about might enable me to eke out a miserable life for a few more days, but eventually, I'll still have to face my bitter end, the final deathblow. What good is it to live a few more days of a life filled with dread? I'd rather accept the circumstances with good will and see who I'll lose my life to."

Having made up his mind, he walked on following the dust kicked up by the three horses right away. Later, several more groups of people went pass him in the same direction and all asked him about the "thin, tall, old man in a white robe with a scimitar by his waist."

"All of these different groups of people are chasing after the old man in white robe. None of them knows where he is, yet all of them are following the same direction. That is so strange!" Linghu Chong thought.

He walked on for another mile or so, crossing through a wood of pine trees, when suddenly a vast wilderness and a dense mass of people appeared in front of his eyes. There were at least six or seven hundred people in the crowd, but the wilderness was so large that the six or seven hundred people in the middle appeared to have only occupied a tiny spot of it. A straight, broad road led

directly to the large crowd, so Linghu Chong simply walked forward along the road, and as he walked closer, the scene became clearer.

In the middle of the crowd stood a small pavilion, the kind used as a wayside shelter for travelers to take a rest in. The build of the pavilion appeared simple and crude. The large crowd of people surrounded the pavilion in a circle yet kept a good distance from it, dozens of feet or so, and nobody closed in on it. After walking another one hundred feet closer, Linghu Chong finally saw him. An old man in a white robe sat in the middle of the pavilion all by himself, drinking wine next to a small table. Whether he had a scimitar by his waist, Linghu Chong could not tell from the distance. Even though he was sitting down, he still looked as tall as a person in average height standing up.

Feeling of reverence swelled up in Linghu Chong's heart. Surrounded by so many enemies, the old man was still able to drink his wine in such a calm and unhurried manner. Among all the heroes Linghu Chong had seen or heard of throughout his life, rarely had one displayed such exceptional heroic spirit. He slowly walked forward and shouldered his way into the crowd. Everyone in the crowd stared at the old man in white robe with fixed eyes and no one paid the slightest attention to Linghu Chong.

Linghu Chong took a good look at the old man. He had a thin face. A bush of sparse, gray beard, long enough to reach his chest, fluttered under his chin in the breeze. Holding the wine cup in his hand, he gazed at the distance where the horizon met with the blue sky without casting even a glance at the crowd surrounding him. He carried a pack on his back, but there was no scimitar by his waist. Turned out that he didn't even have a weapon with him. Linghu Chong had no idea about the old man's name or origin, nor any clue why so many fellow martial people would come after him, nor whether the man was good or evil. He simply admired the heroic spirit the old man had put on display, the self-assurance he had shown as though he was just drink by himself alone and there was no one else even present. And unconsciously, the feeling of mutual sympathy as a fellow sufferer also swelled up in his heart and consumed him. Taking big strides forward, he spoke loudly.

“Hello there, Senior Master. Don’t you feel lonely drinking all by yourself? Let me be your accompany and drink with you.” Walking straight into the pavilion, Linghu Chong cupped his hands toward the old man in greeting and then sat down by the table.

The old man turned his head around and shot a sharp side-glance toward Linghu Chong. What met his eyes was a weaponless and sick-faced young man he had never met before. He let out a snort as a slight look of surprise flashed by his face but did not answer.

Linghu Chong picked up the wine kettle and filled the wine cup in front of the old man before filling a wine cup for himself.

“Cheers!” he raised his cup and toasted. Emptying the content of the wine cup down his throat in a swift swing, he drank it up in one gulp. The wine turned out to be very strong liquor; not only did he feel as though his mouth had just been cut with sharp knives as soon as the wine was poured in, he felt as though his entire stomach was on fire now. “Excellent wine!” he praised in a loud voice.

“Hey idiot! Get out! We are here to fight old Xiang to death. Don’t be a hindrance,” a big fellow outside the pavilion bawled in a husky voice.

“I am only drinking together with Senior Master Xiang. How did I become a hindrance for you?” Linghu Chong replied with a grin.

He filled his cup and then poured the wine into his mouth once again.

“Excellent wine!” he said with a thumb up.

“Move aside, chap, if you don’t want to die for nothing. We have Chief Dongfang’s order to capture renegade Xiang Wentian. If anyone wants to make trouble or interfere, he is guaranteed a horrible death,” a chilling voice rose from the left side.

Linghu Chong cast a glance at the origin of the voice then caught sight of a thin, short man with a white face. The man was dressed in a black robe with a yellow band around his waist. There were two or three hundred people standing next to him all dressed in black robes, but their waistbands were in all kinds of

different colors. Linghu Chong suddenly remembered: when he had met Elder Qu Yang of the Demon's Cult outside of the town of Hengshan, Qu was also dressed in the same kind of black robe, and he could vaguely remember that Qu also had a yellow band around his waist. The thin man said that he was following Chief Dongfang's order to capture a renegade, then, of course, these people were all cult members of the Demon's Cult. Could this thin man have been an elder of the Demon's Cult as well?

Filling his cup with wine, he drank it up a third time. "Excellent wine!" he praised and then said to the old man in white robe, Xiang Wentian, "Senior Master Xiang, I've drunk three cups of your wine. Many thanks! Many thanks!"

"That chap is the expelled apprentice of the Huashan School, Linghu Chong!" someone suddenly shouted out loud from the east end.

Linghu Chong cast a glance toward the direction of the voice and immediately recognized the man who had spoken out: it was Hou Renxiong, the apprentice of the Qingcheng School. Since he paid more attention to the crowd with this glance, he also realized that among the people standing next to Hou Renxiong, many were also members of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance.

"Linghu Chong," a Taoist Priest spoke in a loud and clear voice, "your Master said that you have taken up with evildoers, and he certainly said it right. This demon Xiang Wentian's murderous hands are both covered with blood of chivalry members of the orthodox schools. What are you doing staying together with him? If you don't get lost right now, we'll chop you into bits and pieces."

"Are you an Uncle-Master of the Taishan School? I have never met this Senior Master Xiang before in my entire life. I've only stepped out because I saw the hundreds of you surrounding a man who was all by himself. What is that? And when did the Five Mountains Sword Alliance decided to collaborate with the Demon's Cult? Aren't you afraid to become the laughing stocks of all the heroes under Heaven taking on Senior Master Xiang, a single man, with the combined force of both the orthodox and the heretic schools?" Linghu Chong replied.

"When did we ever collaborate with the Demon's Cult? The Demon's Cult is

here to capture a renegade of their cult; we are here to avenge for friends who have died under the devil's murderous hands. They do their thing and we do our thing. There's no relevance whatsoever!" the Taoist Priest rebuffed furiously.

"Good, good! As long as you fight him one on one, I'll just sit here, drink my wine and watch the fun," Linghu Chong said.

"Who the hell do you think you are? Everybody, let's kill this chap before we get even with that devil Xiang," Hou Renxiong yelled.

"There would be no need to trouble so many people just to kill Linghu Chong, a single man. Brother Hou, you can just come and do it yourself," Linghu Chong said with a grin.

Hou Renxiong knew very well that his own Kung Fu skills were inferior to that of Linghu Chong's learning from his past experience with Linghu Chong in the wine house when Linghu Chong had sent him rolling down the stairs with a single kick and certainly dared not to challenge Linghu Chong all by himself. But he had no idea that the Linghu Chong now was far from the Linghu Chong then and had lost all his internal strengths. The others in the group seemed to have great scruples about Xiang Wentian's Kung Fu skills and none was bold enough to charge into the pavilion.

"Xiang Wentian, when things have come down to this extent, you'd better go see the chief with us and ask for pardon from his Highness. There's still a chance that his Highness might spare your life. You are a great man in our cult. Would you rather see flesh and blood flying in all directions when we fight to death so the outsiders can laugh their heads off?" the thin man from the Demon's Cult shouted.

Xiang Wentian only answered with a snort and gave a sip to the wine in his cup. As he raised his cup, something clanked, and that was when Linghu Chong noticed the iron shackles chained around his two wrists in astonishment.

"So he just escaped from his prison and hasn't even removed the shackles around his wrists," Linghu Chong thought to himself as compassion swelled up

in his heart. “This man is unable to defend himself. Why don’t I help him fend off the attacks for a little while and just give away my life here in this muddled fight?”

At that thought, he stood up, arms akimbo, and said loudly, “How can Senior Master Xiang fight you with his hands tied up in iron chains? Since I drank three cups of his great wine, I guess it will have to be my duty to give him a hand in his defense. Anyone who wants to lay a finger on Senior Master Xiang will have to kill Linghu Chong first.”

Seeing how Linghu Chong had come forward for him for no apparent reason in such a lunatic manner, Xiang Wentian was taken by complete surprise. “Hey boy, why do you help me?” he asked in a whisper.

“Upon seeing injustice, draw one’s sword to set right a wrong,” Linghu Chong replied.

“Where’s your knife then?” Xiang Wentian asked.

“Oh, I use a sword. Too bad I don’t have one,” Linghu Chong replied.

“How are your skills in the sword art? Aren’t you from the Huashan School? Then I am afraid your skills in the sword art won’t be anything exceptional.”

“Nothing exceptional. Besides, I have very severe injuries and have lost all my internal strengths. That only makes the matter worse!” Linghu Chong grinned.

“Man, you are an oddball. Did you know that? Fine, I’ll go get a sword for you,” Xiang Wentian replied.

A white shadow suddenly flashed in front of everybody’s eyes as Xiang Wentian charged toward the crowd. Instantly, reflections from various blades twinkled as over a dozen weapons struck toward him. But Xiang Wentian unexpectedly accelerated sideways and pounced on the Taoist Priest from the Taishan School. The Taoist Priest thrust his sword forward at once. With an agile sway, Xiang Wentian dodged the thrust and stepped behind the Priest’s back. He quickly threw his left elbow backward, which struck the middle of the Taoist Priest’s back in a loud thud. Waving his two arms slightly immediately

after, he caught the Taoist Priest's long sword with the iron chain, and with a swift push to the ground using his left foot, he had leapt back into the pavilion. The entire series of moves were executed in such lightning fast speed. The many fighters of the orthodox schools had the intension of intercepting him but simply had the time for the reaction. One man was the fastest to react and chased after Xiang Wentian instantly. At the time Xiang Wentian had returned to the pavilion, he was only several feet from the pavilion. Raising the broadsword in his hand, he swung the blade at Xiang Wentian's back. But it was as if Xiang Wentian had eyes on his back; without even looking back, he threw a back kick with his left foot, which struck right in the man's solar plexus, sending him flying in the air in a painful cry. The man had put all his strength into the fierce swing of his blade and had no way of retracting the force in time. With a heavy thud, the knife followed through its course and cut off the man's own right leg. Meanwhile, the Taoist Priest from the Taishan School swayed a few times and then collapsed to the ground, blood gushing out continuously from his mouth.

Thunderous cheers exploded among the Demon's Cult crowd. "That's some handsome skills, Right Counselor Xiang!" dozens of excited voices shouted in unison.

Xiang Wentian let out a slight grin and clenched his fist in greetings toward the crowd of the Demon's Cult members, acknowledging the loud cheers. The iron chain tied around his wrists clanked loudly. With a swing of his arm, Xiang Wentian threw the sword toward the table, and with a clatter, the sword tip cut into the table.

"Here you go!" he said.

Linghu Chong felt admiration growing inside him. "This man dares to outface so many first-class masters. Turned out he truly has extraordinary skills," he thought inwardly. But he didn't reach out for the sword.

"Senior Master Xiang possesses such superior Kung Fu skills. There is really no need for me to make a fool of myself. Goodbye," he said, clenching his fist in greetings.

Before Xiang Wentian had a chance to reply, cold flashes from naked blades flickered as three long swords shot toward the pavilion – three apprentices of the Qingcheng School, Hou Renxiong among them, had launched their attacks. All three long swords were aimed at Linghu Chong: one pointed at the middle of his back while the other two pointed at his lower back. The tips of all three swords were less than a foot from Linghu Chong.

"Linghu Chong, on your knees!" Hou Renxiong bellowed. After the shout, he pushed his long sword forward and the sword tip touched Linghu Chong's skin.

"Linghu Chong is a man of high virtues. Even though death is my destiny today, there's no way I'll let myself die from these despicable Qingcheng people's swords," Linghu Chong thought to himself.

At the moment, he was completely enveloped by the forces from the three swords. If he tried to turn around, then instantly, one sword would penetrate his chest and the two other swords would cut into his lower abdomen. So he immediately let out a few loud laughs.

"Fine, I'll be on my knees!" he replied.

Bending his right knee slightly, Linghu Chong quickly retrieved the long sword on the table and gave it a swift swing behind his back. Instantaneously, the three hands of the Qingcheng apprentices were cut off from their wrists and fell to the ground together with their three long swords. Their faces turning completely pale, the three Qingcheng apprentices couldn't even believe their eyes. Only freezing there for a moment from panic, they finally remembered to leap back. One of the Qingcheng apprentice among the three was only about eighteen or nineteen years of age and instantly broke into a loud cry from the excruciating pain.

"Brother, it was you who wanted to kill me first!" Linghu Chong sighed.

"Excellent sword art!" Xiang Wentian cheered. But then he said, "The strength is too weak. Terrible inner strength!"

"It's not terrible inner strength; there's no inner strength at all," Linghu Chong replied with a grin.

Suddenly Xiang Wentian let out a loud shout, then dense clanking sounds from the iron chain followed – two men in black robes had leapt into the pavilion and launched a full out attack at him. One wielded a pair of wrought iron maces while the other one held a pair of iron plates in his hands – both men used weapons of the ultra heavy type. Sparks flew in all directions as the four pieces of weaponry clashed with Xiang Wentian's iron chain. Xiang Wentian dodged a few times in an attempt to get behind the man with iron maces, but the man put up a good defense line with his two maces, shielding all his vital points around his body. Having his two hands tied up in the iron chain, Xiang Wentian obviously had lost quite some agility and speed.

More berating shouts rose exploded from within the crowd of the Demon's Cult members as another two men charged into the pavilion. Both of these two used octagonal copper hammers as their weapons and both smashed their hammers downwardly at Xiang Wentian again and again. As soon as the two with four hammers joined the fight, the man wielding a pair of wrought iron maces immediately turned from defense to offense. Xiang Wentian ducked and darted within the limited space; even though his movements were utterly clever and nimble, he still could not injure any one of his opponents. Every time when there was a crack for Xiang Wentian to take use of, as soon as he tried to exploit it and attacked one with his iron chain, the other three would throw themselves on him like mad men with no regard of their own safety. Such fighting techniques were as fierce as it could be.

After they have exchanged a dozen or so moves, the leader of the Demon's Cult crowd shouted, "Eight spears, charge, all together!"

At that command, long spears in their tight grips, eight men in black robes rushed into the pavilion from all four directions. North, south, east and west, two long spears in each direction, all aimed at Xiang Wentian.

"Little friend, you'd better get out of here!" Xiang Wentian shouted at Linghu Chong. Before his voice even died out, the eight long spears had stabbed toward him all at once; in the meantime, the four copper hammers pounded toward his chest and stomach, the two iron maces swept toward his shinbones, and the two

iron plates smashed toward his face – all vicious moves in all directions. At the moment, the twelve first-class fighters of the Demon's Cult had spared neither effort nor mercy; apparently every one of them knew too well that fighting Xiang Wentian was the most dangerous thing in the entire world, and any second longer the fight lasted would only translate to another step closer to the gate of hell.

"How shameless!" seeing the many people attacking Xiang Wentian so ruthlessly and the chance for Xiang Wentian to come through with this getting slimmer by the second, Linghu Chong bawled.

All of a sudden, Xiang Wentian spun his body in tremendous speed, and the iron chain around his wrists swung up and clanked loudly as it collided with the many weapons. His body almost looked like a peg-top, spinning so rapidly that all everyone could see was a white blurry shadow. Two loud clanks exploded when his iron chain collided with the two iron plates, sending them flying out of the pavilion through the top, leaving two big holes in the ceiling. By then, Xiang Wentian didn't even bother looking at the moves of his opponents and simply spin faster and faster, knocking the eight long spears away from him.

"Slow down your attack and let him exhaust himself!" the Demon Cult leader ordered.

"Yes!" the eight spear-wielding men answered all together and then each took two steps back, waiting for the chance of another full out attack when Xiang Wentian would show cracks in his defense shield from any slight exhaustion.

Among the watching audiences, the ones who had a little bit of experience could all tell that Xiang Wentian would not spin like this for very long no matter how extraordinary his Kung Fu skills were. Continue fighting like this, Xiang Wentian would only end up exhausting all his strength and wait for capture with tied hands.

Xiang Wentian broke into loud laughter. Suddenly, he squatted slightly and struck out with the iron chain. The end of the iron chain hit one of the men wielding copper hammers right in the waist. The man cried out loud in pain, and

the copper hammer in his left hand swung back toward himself and smashed his own head. The eight spearmen thrust their spears out in unison, attacking all around Xiang Wentian's body. Xiang Wentian swung his iron chain and knocked two spears out of the way, while the other six spears stabbed toward the right side of his rib cage as though agreed upon beforehand. At the instant, even if Xiang Wentian could dodge the first spear, he would not be able to dodge the second one, or even if Xiang Wentian could manage to dodge the second spear, there was no way for him to dodge the third one, much less when there were a total of six spears thrust at him at the same time.

Watching by the side, Linghu Chong saw the simultaneous stabs from the six spears and knew that Xiang Wentian had no chance of dodging them. Before he knew it, he was seized by a sudden impulse and remembered the fourth stance of the Dugu Nine Swords, Spear-breaking Stance. The extremely critical situation did not allow him to think any further; with a cold flash, he thrust out his long sword. A loud clank echoed as the eight spears fell to the floor. There were eight spears falling down to the floor, yet there was only one clank, as though the eight spears had fallen to the floor at the exact moment. Since the move from Linghu Chong was aimed at eight different wrists, of course it could not hit eight wrists at the exact instant, but the thrust was so fast that it almost felt as though the thrust prodded all eight wrists simultaneously.

Once the sword moves started, Linghu Chong simply followed the flow and launched the fifth move, Mace-breaking Stance. The name "Mace-breaking Stance" was a general title and contained many variations of techniques. It can be used to counter short handled weapons ranging from steel club, iron mace, acupoint-sealing peg, judge's-pens, crutches, Emei sting, dagger, war axe, iron plate, octagonal hammer, and iron awl. After a few quick flashes, the two iron maces and the two copper hammers also fell to the floor. Out of the total of twelve Demon's Cult members charging into the pavilion, except one that had been killed by Xiang Wentian and one whose iron plates had been knocked out of his grips, the rest ten men all took a prod on their wrists and dropped their weapons. After a cry in panic, the eleven men ran back to their own crowd in a fluster while the crowd of orthodox school members couldn't help but cheer

loudly.

"Excellent sword art!"

"The sword art of the Huashan School has really widened our views!"

The Demon Cult leader gave another command and a group of five charged into the pavilion at once – a middle-aged woman wielding two long knives came running directly toward Linghu Chong and the other four men began attacking Xiang Wentian in a circle. The woman's knife moves were extremely speedy. She had one knife in defense and one knife in quick offense. When the left knife was attacking, she would use the right knife to defend, and vise versa, when the right knife was attacking, she would use the left knife to defend. So by using both knives, every move was attacking the enemy while every move was also defending herself. The defense was tight and secure while the attack was vivid and through. Linghu Chong couldn't see the moves clearly and had to take four steps back in a row. Then he heard loud swooshing sounds. It looked as though someone was attacking Xiang Wentian with a flexible weapon. While busying himself in dodging the chops from the woman, Linghu Chong still managed to take a peer with a squint. What he saw were two men, each wielding a chained mallet, and two men using whips in a fierce fight with Xiang Wentian, who still only had the iron chains around his wrists. The steel chain on a chained mallet was very long, and when one swung the chained mallet, it could reach up to ten feet away. For several times, the mallet actually flew over Linghu Chong's head only a few feet above him.

"Dammit!" Xiang Wentian cursed.

"Right Counselor Xiang, pardon me!" a man yelled in reply.

Turned out that the iron chain around Xiang Wentian's wrists had been entwined with the steel chain from one of the chained mallet. And in a snap of a second, the other three weapons from the rest three attackers struck at Xiang Wentian's body concurrently. Xiang Wentian sneered. He pulled with tremendous force, pulling the man wielding the chained mallet right in front of him just in time, and the two whips together with the second chained mallet all

landed squarely on the man's back.

Linghu Chong thrust his sword out in a tilted angle, and the sword tip drifted a few times before hitting the woman's left wrist. But the blade of the sword actually bent into an arc with a loud clang, and instead of falling out of the grip from the woman's hand, the long knife chopped right back at Linghu Chong from sideways.

Linghu Chong felt a shock, but soon understood, "She is wearing a wrist cuff made of steel. That's why the sword tip could not cut through it."

Rotating his wrist slightly, he turned the thrust into an upward poke. Thud! The sword tip pierced the Jian-Zhen Acupoint on the woman's left shoulder. The woman froze for a split second, but being a bold and tough fighter, she still slashed the knife in her right hand with all her strength despite the great pain coming from her left shoulder. Linghu Chong snapped his wrist gently and with a quick flash, the woman's Jian-Zhen Acupoint on her right shoulder was also hit and she could no longer hold on to her weapons. She used all her remaining strength to throw the two knives at Linghu Chong, but her two arms had already lost most of their strengths; the two knives only went as far as a little bit over one foot before losing their momentum and falling to the floor.

Right after Linghu Chong had defeated the woman, a Taoist Priest stepped out of the crowd of the orthodox school members.

"I am afraid that the Huashan School probably doesn't have such bewitched sword art," he bawled out.

From his attire, Linghu Chong could tell that he must have been a senior master in the Taishan School. He also figured that the Taoist Priest must have loathed how Xiang Wentian had injured his fellow apprentice and decided to step forward to get even. Although Linghu Chong had been expelled from the Huashan School by his Master, having grown up in the Huashan School, he always remembered the motto: the Five Mountains Sword Alliance, same root different branches. So upon seeing this senior master from the Taishan School, naturally he reacted respectfully. Turning his long sword to point the sword tip

downward, he cupped his hands in greetings.

"Linghu Chong dares not to offend Uncle-Master of the Taishan School."

The Taoist Priest's name was Tian-Yi and was in the same generation of apprenticeship with Priest Tian-Men and Priest Tian-Song.

"What kind of sword art did you just use?" he asked coldly.

"The sword art Linghu Chong just used was taught by a senior master of the Huashan School," Linghu Chong answered.

"Total nonsense!" Priest Tian-Yi let out a disgruntled snort. "Where did you find a devil to teach you that? Watch out!"

As soon as the last word went out of his mouth, Priest Tian-Yi thrust his sword directly at Linghu Chong's chest. The naked blade flashed accompanied by a continuing buzzing sound. Just with this one thrust, the forces carried on the sword had already covered the Tan-Zhong, Shen-Zang, Ling-Xu, Shen-Fen, Bu-Lang, Yu-Man, and Tong-Gu these seven major acupoints on Linghu Chong's chest, and regardless of which way he dodged, the sword tip would always be able to penetrate one of the seven acupoints.

This sword move was named "Seven Stars in the Vast Sky" and was the cream of the crop in the entire Taishan School Sword Art. Once the move had started, the only way to evade it was to leap back over a dozen feet instantly. Not only would it require the opponent to possess very advanced Qing-Gong skills, the opponent also needed to be fully aware of the potential power of this "Seven Stars in the Vast Sky" move and leap backward without any hesitation as soon as the move was executed in order to escape the fatal injury from a chest penetration. And as soon as the opponent landed back onto his feet, he must be ready to parry the three swift and fierce consecutive moves that came immediately after. These three consecutive moves, each one more vicious than the previous one and all interlinked, would be very difficult to cope with. Since Priest Tian-Yi saw with his own eyes how excellent Linghu Chong's sword art skills were, he decided to use this move with his first thrust. Ever since the senior master of the Taishan School invented this sword move, it probably had

never been used in the first round of fight before today.

Astonished by the sudden attack, Linghu Chong suddenly had a brainwave and remembered seeing this move on the rock wall inside the back cave on top of the Cliff of Contemplation. That day he actually studied this move so he could use it against Tian Boguang. Even though he had failed to imitate it correctly and hadn't beat Tian Boguang with the move, he had a clear understanding of the flow of this sword move. At the instant when the cold blade almost touched his body, having no spare time to think it through, he thrust his sword at Priest Tian-Yi's lower abdomen at once. This thrust was none other than the thrust depicted in the drawing on the rock wall, the one created by the Demon's Cult Elder to counter this move. At the first glance, it seemed that this thrust would allow the practitioner to end in common ruin together with his enemy, but in fact, this move "Seven Stars in the Vast Sky" of the Taishan School actually had two sections: in the first section the force of the sword would cover the seven vital acupoint on the enemy's chest, and while the enemy was scared out of his wits, the practitioner would use the techniques in the second section to penetrate one of the seven acupoints he saw fit. Even though the force from the sword covered seven acupoints, but to kill the enemy, one stab would do the job. Regardless of which acupoint the sword penetrated, the resulting victory would have been all the same, that was why there would have been no need to penetrate all seven acupoints, and it would have been impossible to penetrate all seven acupoints at the same instant. One move containing two sections was actually the key of success for this sword move, but after the Demon's Cult Elder deliberated it carefully many years back, he was able to find the flaw from within: as soon as the first section of the sword move was executed, if the opponent immediately thrust at the lower abdomen of the enemy, the move "Seven Stars in the Vast Sky" would have been broken, and the second section would never happen.

As soon as Priest Tian-Yi saw the profound counter move from Linghu Chong, he knew too well that he had no way of dodging it. Turning completely pale with fright, he screamed in fear, figuring that by then the long sword must have penetrated his abdomen. In the utmost panic, he could no longer feel any

pain, and his brain also seemed to have seized functioning. Convinced that he must have died already, he collapsed to the ground. At the time when his sword tip was almost touching Priest Tian-Yi's lower abdomen, Linghu Chong had stopped the thrust midway; who would have thought that the Priest Tian-Yi would be scared unconscious from the tremendous shock.

Watching Priest Tian-Yi collapsing to the ground, members of the Taishan School in the crowd were convinced that Linghu Chong must have seriously injured Tian-Yi and immediately shouted loud curses. Five young Taoist Priests ran out of the crowd and charged at Linghu Chong. These five men were all apprentices of Priest Tian-Yi. Consumed by blinding rage and the determination to avenge for their Master, they waved their five long swords about madly and swept toward Linghu Chong like a thunderstorm. Linghu Chong poked out with his long sword in quick succession and the five Taoist Priests each took a cut in his wrist. Loud clanking echoed when five long swords fell to the floor. Scared out of their wits, the five men leapt back when Priest Tian-Yi tottered back onto his feet, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"I am dead! I am dead!"

The five apprentices were thunderstruck. They couldn't find any wound on their Master's body, but hearing their master screaming again and again, they were not sure whether their master was dead already or still alive.

After several loud screams, Priest Tian-Yi's body gave a violent shake and he collapsed to the ground once again. Two of his apprentices rushed by his side and propped him up, then retreated back to the crowd in sore straits.

With only half a move, Linghu Chong had defeated Priest Tian-Yi, an elite fighter of the Taishan School. The audiences found themselves in complete shock. By then, the attackers around Xiang Wentian had changed. The two men wielding long swords were members of the Hengshan School. Their two swords rose and fell speedily, always looking for gaps in Xiang Wentian's defense with the iron chain. Another man held a shield in his left hand and a knife in his right hand. He was someone from the Demon's Cult. Using the shield to protect his body, the man fought with a Ground-Snuggling Knife Form. He would roll close

to Xiang Wentian's feet and then attack his lower body from close to the ground. Twice, Xiang Wentian struck the man's shield heavily with his iron chain, which had no effect the man under the shield. But the knife under the shield kept stretching out and drawing back, one vicious move after another.

"With the shield to protect his body, this man's defense is very tight. But when he stretches his arm out to attack, that's when the weakness exposes. His opponent can then break his arm," Linghu Chong thought.

"Hey, buddy, do you want to die?" suddenly, a voice rose from behind his back.

The voice was not particularly loud, but it was very close to him, probably only a foot or so from his ear. Astounded, Linghu Chong turned around and then found himself standing face to face next to a man, so close that their noses almost touched each other. Just when he was about to duck, the man had placed his two palms on Linghu Chong's chest.

"If I strike with my inner energy, it will break all your ribs," the man said in a chilling voice.

Linghu Chong knew the man was not exaggerating, and stood still, his heart almost stopped beating. The man gazed into Linghu Chong's eyes. Since the two of them were so close to each other, Linghu Chong couldn't see the man's face. All he could see were two sharp and shining eyes with a stern stare.

"So this is the man who will kill me," Linghu Chong thought, feeling much at ease now that the matter of his life would finally be settled once for all.

The man also noticed the mood change. At first, Linghu Chong's eyes were filled with terror, but only instants later it was already replaced by a look of unconcern and indifference. Facing death with assurance was something even masters with superior attainments in the Martial World could rarely achieve. He couldn't help but feel respect spewing in his heart.

"I subdued your vital acupoint only by a sneak attack. If I kill you like this, I am sure you'll refuse to take defeat!" he said with a laugh before retreating his palms and taking three steps back.

Now Linghu Chong could finally take a good look at him. What he saw was a short, chubby man with a yellowish, fat face in his fifties. His two fat palms were both small and thick. With one palm up and one palm down, the man showed a stance of the "Songyang Palm."

"Senior master of the Hengshan School, may I ask for your respectful name? Many thanks for showing mercy with your palm strike," Linghu Chong said with a smile.

"I am Yue Hou," the man replied. After a short pause, he spoke again, "Your sword skills are outstanding, indeed. But your combat experience is too little."

"How embarrassing! 'Great Yin-Yang Palm' Uncle-Master Yue, you are too fast for me," Linghu Chong said.

"Uncle-Master? I really don't deserve that!" Yue Hou replied.

Bringing his left hand upward, he threw a knife-hand chop with his right hand. Though his appearance was ugly, as soon as his move started, his entire body looked as solemn as a mountain with imposing bearings and became indescribably attractive. Linghu Chong couldn't find a single flaw around his entire body.

"Excellent palm skills!" Linghu Chong acclaimed and swung his long sword upward. Because he couldn't find a single flaw in Yue Hou's palm form and his movement, this thrust of his had both defense and offense, ninety percent of it was false while only ten percent of it was real.

But in Yue Hou's eyes, this upward swing was brilliant. Regardless of which part of Linghu Chong's body he planned to strike using his two palms, he would always end up sending the center of his palm toward the tip of the sword. So only half way through the palm strikes with his two hands, he immediately retracted his palms and leapt backward.

"Excellent sword art!" he shouted.

"Pardon me!" Linghu Chong replied humbly.

"Watch out!" Yue Hou yelled as he pushed out with both palms and a strong

gust of energy force blasted toward Linghu Chong.

"Oh no!" Linghu Chong groaned inwardly.

At the time Yue Hou was at a good distance from him. When Yue struck out with his two palms remotely, he had no way of warding the attack off using his long sword. Just when the thought of jumping out of the way popped in his mind, a freezing sensation had shot up his entire body. He couldn't help but shiver. The palm strike from each of You Hou's hands had different attributes. One had the force of Yin while the other had the force of Yang. The Yang palm strike was launched earlier, yet the Yin force reached the target first. Linghu Chong only had a fraction of a second to pull himself together when the burning hot energy force struck his body and shook his body violently, almost knocked the wind out of him. When one was struck with both the Yin energy force and the Yang energy force, normally he would have no chance of surviving, but in Linghu Chong's case, though he had lost all his inner energy, his body was filled with abundant inner energy, among which were the inner energy from the Peach Valley's Six Fairies, also the inner energy from Monk No Commandment, and when he was in the Shaolin Temple, he also received a good amount of inner energy from Great Master Fang-Sheng. Any one of those energy streams was vigorous enough, not mentioning he had many of them inside him. When the two energy forces, one Yin and one Yang, struck his body, the inner energy streams inside him naturally reacted by creating energy shields around his internal organs and his vital channels, preventing any injuries. But the strike still gave a tremendous shake to his entire body and he felt indescribable suffering. Afraid that Yue Hou would strike him again with energy forces, he dashed out of the pavilion and thrust his sword out rapidly.

Succeeded with his remote palm strikes, You Hou figured that his opponent would at least drop down with severe injuries if not drop dead. He had not expected to see Linghu Chong getting off without a scratch. Then immediately after, many reflections from the sword tip flashed, all aiming at the center of his palms. Astounded, he crisscrossed his palms and struck out, one striking toward Linghu Chong's face, the other one striking toward Linghu Chong's lower

abdomen. Just when he was about to release the energy forces for the strikes, he suddenly felt a violent pain: his one palm on the back of the other, both had been stringed together by the blade of Linghu Chong's long sword. It was unclear whether Linghu Chong had penetrated his two palms consecutively or he had struck his palms to the tip of the sword himself. All he could see was that his left palm was in front, his right palm was behind, and the exposing blade behind the back of his right palm was as long as five inches.

If Linghu Chong took advantage of the situation and push his sword forward, the sword tip would instantly penetrate Yue Hou's chest, but with consideration of how Yue had showed him mercy with the palm strike earlier, he held his sword still after the blade penetrated Yue's two palms. You Hou let out a loud cry, pulled his palms off the blade, and leapt backward.

"Sorry!" Linghu Chong called out, feeling very regretful.

The move he had just used was one of the techniques in the Palm-breaking Stance of the Dugu Nine Swords. Ever since Feng Qingyang went into seclusion, this move had never emerged in the entire Martial World. Suddenly loud cracking sounds exploded from behind Linghu Chong. He turned his head and looked over his shoulder and saw seven or eight men attacking Xiang Wentian all together. Two men in the group had very fierce palm power and the forces from their palm strikes had broke the pillar and the girder of the pavilion. Rafters and tiles started falling off the roof one after another, but the fighters were so involved in the fight, even when tiles fell on their heads, none paid any attention.

Within the brief moment when Linghu Chong looked back over his shoulder, Yue Hou had charged at him and struck out with a palm strike. The force from the palm strike hit Linghu Chong squarely on his chest and sent him flying in the air, his long sword also falling out of his grip. Before his back even landed back to the ground, seven or eight men had dashed toward him, raising their weapons high in the air and striking down toward him all together.

"Hey, you cherry pickers!" Linghu Chong grinned.

Suddenly, he felt something tightening around his waist – an iron chain had just flown by, wrapped around his body, and pulled hard. And in the next moment, he was already flying in the midair as though he had the magical power of mounting the clouds and riding the mist. It was none other than the master-hand of the Demon's Cult, Xiang Wentian, who had just saved his life.

Having been chased around and beleaguered by both the Demon's Cult and the orthodox schools, Xiang Wentian had been on the brink of exhaustion. Then, all of a sudden, a fear-for-nothing young man stepped out of nowhere to defend him against injustice. Naturally he had a high opinion of the young man. After watching how Linghu Chong had fought with his opponent, Xiang Wentian had made out that the young man had extraordinary sword art skills yet had terrible inner strength; and with so many tough enemies attacking him all together, he was really in an extremely dangerous state. Therefore, while contending with his own enemies, he never ceased paying attention to Linghu Chong's condition. When he saw Linghu Chong being knocked into the air, he swung his iron chain at him right away and began scurrying, pulling Linghu Chong behind him.

Once Xiang Wentian began running using his Qing-Gong, it was as though he had turned into a galloping horse, and within only seconds, he was already scores of feet away. Dozens of people chased behind him, and many shouted out loudly.

"Xiang Wentian escaped! Xiang Wentian escaped!"

Xiang Wentian was exasperated. Turning around all of a sudden, he charged a few steps back. The men chasing him were taken completely by surprise and paused their steps at once. One of them had slightly weaker Qing-Gong skills. Not able to stop his running so abruptly like everybody else, he ran directly into Xiang Wentian's left foot flying kick and flew right back toward the chasing crowd.

Turning around once again, Xiang Wentian resumed running, and the crowd behind him also resumed their chase. By now, none of the followers was bold enough to dash at full speed, and the distance between Xiang Wentian and them

furthered gradually.

"This young man was never acquainted with me yet was ready to die for me. Friends like this are too hard to come by. But those bastards simply would not leave me alone. How can I get rid of them?" Xiang Wentian thought to himself without slowing down with his running.

After a moment of running, he suddenly remembered a place and felt very pleased. "That place would be just perfect." But another thought immediately popped out, "That place is far from here. I wonder if I have enough strength to run over there. No worries! If I run out of strength, those bastards would only run out of strength before I do."

He looked up at the sun to make out the directions, and then crossed the wheat field in a diagonal line and headed straight toward the northeast corner. After running another five miles or so, he had returned to the main road. Suddenly three galloping horses dashed past them narrowly missing them.

"God damn it!" Xiang Wentian cursed.

He suddenly took in a long breath and accelerated until he was right behind the last horse. Leaping into the midair, he kicked the rider off the horseback with a swift flying kick and then landed on the horseback himself. After placing Linghu Chong across the saddle in front of him, he swung his iron chain in a sweeping motion and knocked the two riders off their horsebacks. The strike broke the two riders' many bones and evidently they would not survive it. Judging from their attires, all three riders were common people, none had anything to do with the Martial World. It was very unfortunate that they happened to bump into Xiang Wentian the malefic at the nick of time and lost their lives for no reason. The two horses kept galloping forward even though their riders had fallen off. Xiang Wentian shot the iron chain out and caught the reins. He was able to utilize the iron chain free at will as though it was an extra long arm of his. Witnessing his indiscriminate killing of innocent people, Linghu Chong couldn't help but groan inwardly.

Having seized three horses, Xiang Wentian found himself in high spirits. He

looked up at sky and burst into loud laughter.

“Little brother, those bastards won’t be able to keep up with us now!” he exclaimed.

“Not for today. But what about tomorrow?” Linghu Chong let out a slight smile.

“God damn it! The hell with them! I’ll whack them one by one,” Xiang Wentian cursed.

Riding the three horses in turns, Xiang Wentian speeded down the main road for a good while and then turned into a mountain road. The mountain road became steeper and steeper. Eventually, it was too steep for the horses to climb.

“Are you hungry?” Xiang Wentian asked.

“En,” Linghu Chong nodded. “Do you have any food?” he asked.

“Nope. But we have horse blood!” Xiang Wentian answered.

He dismounted his horse, and clawed the neck of the horse with his right hand, instantly creating a big hole in it and thick streams of blood gushed out at once. Moving his mouth next to it, Xiang Wentian swallowed several gulps of horse blood.

“Your turn!” he said.

Linghu Chong was in shock, completely astonished by the unusual scene.

“If we don’t drink horse blood, how do we gain our strength for more fights?” Xiang Wentian said again.

“More fights?” Linghu Chong muttered.

“Are you afraid?” Xiang Wentian asked.

Linghu Chong’s heroic spirit soared at once. He let out a few loud laughs and replied, “What do you think?”

Moving his mouth next to the horse neck, he felt the horse blood gushing toward his throat. Without hesitation, he swallowed it down. At first, the horse

blood tasted with a strong fishy smell, but after several mouthful of it, it no longer smelled that bad. Linghu Chong drank over a dozen mouthful of horse blood one after another and did not move his mouth away until he felt completely full in his stomach. Xiang Wentian followed suit and drank more blood. Before long, the horse could no longer hold out and collapsed in long, painful neighs. Raising his left foot, Xiang Wentian booted the horse into the ravine.

Linghu Chong gasped with astonishment. The horse, a large beast, weighed at least five hundred pounds. He almost couldn't believe his eyes when he watched Xiang Wentian booting it into the ravine with such a casual kick.

After booting the second horse into the ravine, Xiang Wentian turned around and threw a knife hand chop at the third horse, which chopped one of the hind legs off the horse. In the same way, he chopped the other hind leg off. The horse neighed deafeningly; even after it was booted into the ravine by Xiang Wentian's kick, the painful neighs continued on.

"This leg is yours! If you eat it slowly, there should be enough for ten day's worth," Xiang Wentian said.

By then, Linghu Chong finally came to realization that Xiang Wentian had only chopped the hind legs off for food and wasn't being brutal simply for the fun of it. So he took a horse leg in compliance and once Xiang Wentian began climbing the mountain path with a horse leg in his hand, he followed behind quietly.

Xiang Wentian slowed down his paces and walked unhurriedly. Because Linghu Chong had lost all his internal strength, only half a mile into the walk, he was already falling far behind, wheezing uncontrollably, his face turning completely pale, and Xiang Wentian had to stop to wait for him. After another mile or so, Linghu Chong couldn't walk any further and had to sit down to catch his breath.

"Little brother, you are certainly very unusual. Your inner strength is so terrible, however, after taking two hits from Yue Hou that scumbag's Great Yin-Yang Palm strikes, you look as though nothing had happened to you. This is

really beyond me," Xiang Wentian remarked.

"What makes you think nothing happened to me? My internal organs have all turned upside down from the shockwave, and who knows how many dozens of internal injuries it must have inflicted upon me. You know, I was just wondering about this thing myself? How come I am still not dead yet? Maybe I'll be collapsing down any second now and not be able to ever get up again," Linghu Chong replied with a wry grin.

"Well, let's rest a bit longer then," Xiang Wentian said.

At first, Linghu Chong had wanted to explain to Xiang Wentian that there was really no need to wait for him any longer and let the enemies catch up with Xiang Wentian, since he wasn't going to live for long any way, but then thought better of it. Xiang Wentian was a heroic man; he would never have abandoned him so he could flee for his own life. If he had said something along that line, he would have really insulted Xiang Wentian.

"Little brother, how did you lose your internal strength?" Xiang Wentian sat down on a big rock and asked.

"Well, this is a very funny story." Linghu Chong let out a light grin and began explaining in short how he had been injured, how the Peach Valley's Six Fairies injected their inner energy into his body in an attempt to heal him, and how Monk No Commandment injected more inner energy into his body later.

"I've never heard of anything weirder than this one!" Xiang Wentian broke into a loud laugh, and his thunderous laughter echoed round the valley.

Suddenly, sound of loud bawling rose from a distance amongst Xiang Wentian's loud laughter.

"Xiang Wentian, you can't run away. You'd better behave yourself and surrender now."

But Xiang Wentian kept laughing out loud. "Funny! Very funny! The Peach Valley's Six Fairies and the Monk No Commandment are all first-class idiots!" he exclaimed. After another three laughs, he knitted his brows and scolded,

“God damn it! Large crowd of bastards have caught up with us.”

He reached out and picked Linghu Chong up into his arms. Having no spare hand to carry the horse leg, he left it by the side of the road and began running. Once he picked up speed, Linghu Chong felt as though he was flying above the cloud. And soon after, Linghu Chong suddenly found himself inside a vast expanse of whiteness – they had actually run into a large cloud of mist.

“Wonderful!” Linghu Chong thought to himself. “We’ve climbed onto a peak. Now those several hundred people can’t charge forward altogether. As long as they fight us one on one, this Mr. Xiang and I, for sure, can deal with it.”

The shouting behind them came closer and closer. Apparently the people right behind them were also masters in Qing-Gong. Even though their Qing-Gong skills were inferior to that of Xiang Wentian’s, carrying a man in his arms, Xiang Wentian unavoidably slowed down after running for an extensive period of time.

After reaching a turning corner of the road, Xiang Wentian placed Linghu Chong on the ground and whispered, “Be quiet.”

Both of them stood quietly, pressing their backs against the precipice wall. Only a moment later, sounds of footsteps rose as someone closed in. The men in pursuit dashed at full speed. In the thick mist, neither of them saw Xiang Wentian or Linghu Chong. Only after they had run pass the side of them did they notice the two of them, and before they had a chance to stop and turn around, Xiang Wentian had struck out with his two palms. The palm strike was both resolute and accurate. The two men fell into the ravine without even a groan, and a short while later, two muffled flops came as their bodies hit the bottom of the ravine.

“Why didn’t these two scream when they were falling?” Linghu Chong asked himself. “Oh, I see. Before they fell down, the force from the palm strike had killed them instantly.”

“Those two scumbags loved to swagger around, calling themselves ‘The Diancang School Duo Swordsmen, Forces of Sword Towering the Heaven.’

Now they can rot in the abyss, their stinks towering the Heaven! Ha-ha!" Xiang Wentian sneered.

Linghu Chong had heard the fame of the "Diancang School Duo Swordsmen" mentioned to him before. He heard that the two men had excellent sword skills and had slain many formidable outlaws. Little had he expected to see them die so muddleheaded here today and didn't even get a chance to see their faces.

"There are still about five miles from here to Xianchou Gorge. Once we get to the gorge, we won't have to worry about those scumbags any more," picking Linghu Chong up once again, Xiang Wentian said.

He resumed running with faster and faster paces, but sounds of footsteps rose from behind as several more people began catching up with them. At the time, the mountain path turned eastward and no longer had the cliff by the side. Xiang Wentian couldn't play the same old trick again by hiding next to the precipice wall for sneak attacks and could only keep running with all his strength.

A swooshing sound suddenly broke out as a projectile flew toward Xiang Wentian's back. It sounded loud and strong – apparently the projectile was something very heavy. Xiang Wentian put Linghu Chong on the ground and turned around, catching the projectile in the air.

"Mr. He, when did you decide to get involved with this? Has this gotten anything to do with you?" he cursed.

"You have become the bane of the Martial World, and everyone has the very right to kill you. Now take this flying awl from me," a voice shouted from within the mist followed by continuous swooshing sounds. He had said "this flying awl" but at least seven or eight flying awls had been shot forward.

Hearing the loud and shrill sounds made by the projectiles tearing through air, Linghu Chong was deeply concerned.

"Even though the sword techniques taught by Grand Uncle-Master Feng can be used to block any projectiles or missiles, the forces carried by the awls are simply too strong. I can hit them, but the tremendous force would break the sword for sure," he thought to himself.

He cast a glance at Xiang Wentian, who was now squatting in a horse stance, his upper body leaning forward slightly, his face looking nervous, very different from the unconcerned face he had had when he was still in the pavilion surrounded by hundreds of enemies. When the flying awls reached Xiang Wentian, they silenced one after another. Linghu Chong figured that they must have all been caught by Xiang Wentian. All of a sudden, many swooshing sounds broke out all together as numerous awls were shot out at once. Linghu Chong knew that this was a projectile throwing technique named "Raindrops All Over the Sky." Normally when someone shot projectiles using this technique, the projectile he used must have been small ones such as coin-darts, or iron lotus seeds. Judging from the loud sounds made by the flying awls, each one had to be at least half a pound, if not a full pound. How could dozens of them be shot out at once? After hearing the loud and shrill sounds, he took a prone spontaneously, and then he heard a loud "ouch" from Xiang Wentian as though he had been wounded severely. In great astonishment he leapt forward and hid Xiang Wentian behind his back.

"Mr. Xiang, are you wounded?" he asked hurriedly.

"I…I won't make it. You…you…you'd better run…for yourself…." Xiang Wentian replied in fits and starts.

"We live and die together. Linghu Chong won't abandon you just to save his own life!" Linghu Chong replied loudly.

"Xiang Wentian has been hit by the flying awls!" the chasing enemies shouted out loudly and dimly, over a dozen shadows closed in upon them little by little.

Suddenly, Linghu Chong felt a strong gust blowing past him by his right side, then came Xiang Wentian's loud laughter as the dozen shadows in front collapsed to the ground. Turned out that Xiang Wentian caught the dozens of flying awls all into his hands but pretended to get hit, then when the enemies were off guard, he shot the many flying awls back also using the "Raindrops All Over the Sky" technique. Because they were in a very heavy mist and no one could see clearly, besides, Linghu Chong's worried voice was completely sincere, so every one of the chasing enemies believed it wholeheartedly, in

addition, no one had expected that Xiang Wentian was also capable of shooting out such heavy projectiles using the “Raindrops All Over the Sky” technique, so none of the dozen or so people at the front was able to dodge the attack, resulting in several dead corpses and severe injuries for the rest of them.

Xiang Wentian picked up Linghu Chong and turned around to run once again.

“Very good! Little brother! You are a good brother,” he praised, thinking to himself that when Linghu Chong had stepped forward to defend him recklessly, it could be accounted to the eccentric temper of a young man, but when he pretended to be wounded severely a moment ago, Linghu Chong would not run for his own life and was determined to live or die together with him. That was indeed the most precious virtue in the Martial World – “code of brotherhood.”

After a short while, once again, the enemies gained on them bit by bit. Swooshing sounds resumed continuously as projectiles, darts were pelted toward them nonstop. Because Xiang Wentian had to keep bending over or jumping up and down to dodge them, the enemies were able to quickly shorten the distance.

Putting Linghu Chong down on the ground, Xiang Wentian suddenly dashed into the chasing crowd with a loud roar. Several loud clanking sounds exploded and Xiang Wentian quickly returned, not just by himself, but also with a man on his back. After tying the man’s hands with his iron chain and carrying him on his back, Xiang Wentian placed Linghu Chong back in his arms and resumed running.

“We’ve got ourselves a live shield!” he grinned.

“Stop shooting projectiles! Stop shooting projectiles!” the man screamed loudly, but the chasing enemies ignored his plea and kept shooting projectiles and darts forward.

“Ouch!” the man suddenly groaned loudly as a projectile hit him on the back.

With both the live shield on his back and Linghu Chong in his arms, Xiang Wentian kept running with good agility, while the man on his back cussed loudly.

“Wang Conggu, damn you, you son of a gun. You know it’s me…ouch! It’s a sleeve-arrow![62] God damn it! Zhang Furong, you bitch! You…you are just getting back on me, aren’t you?”

After some continuous popping sound, the man’s cussing voice went lower and lower gradually, and eventually fell silent.

“Oops, our live shield is a dead shield now,” Xiang Wentian grinned.

Without any scruples for projectiles, Xiang Wentian ran as fast as he could and after turning two mountain ridges, he finally said, “We are here!” Letting out a long breath, he broke into loud laughter, his mind completely free from any worries. The last five miles of running was extremely dangerous. He really had had no confidence that he would be able to shake off the chasing enemies.

Linghu Chong scanned the surroundings widely and felt a slight surprise. A narrow stone beam lay in front of his eyes, leading into a bottomless abyss. The stone beam only had a visible part of eight or nine feet long; anything further was completely concealed in thick mist. He couldn’t tell how long the stone beam was and where it led to.

“It’s an iron chain in the mist. Don’t step onto it carelessly,” Xiang Wentian whispered.

“Got it,” Linghu Chong answered, his heart thumping rapidly. “This stone beam’s width is no wider than a foot with a bottomless abyss right below it. This is already extremely dangerous. With an iron chain in the place of the stone beam, it is impossible for me to cross it with my current Kung Fu,” he thought inwardly.

Xiang Wentian untied the iron chain around the hands of the “dead shield,” and then drew a long sword by the man’s waist and handed it over to Linghu Chong. Placing the “shield” in front of himself, he waited for the enemies silently. Within a few minutes, the first block of enemies had arrived. Among them were both members of the Demon’s Cult and members of the orthodox schools. Seeing the precipitous terrain and Xiang Wentian’s “fighting with one’s back to the river”[63] stance, none of them was bold enough to charge forward.

After a while, more and more enemies arrived. Gathering at about fifty or sixty feet away from Linghu Chong and Xiang Wentian, they shouted their curses for a while and began shooting all kinds of projectiles, darts, migratory locust rocks, sleeve-arrows, and so on and so on. Xiang Wentian and Linghu Chong hid behind the “shield” and none of the projectiles could reach them.

Suddenly, a thunderous roar blasted as a boorish mendicant monk charged forward, leaving booming echoes reverberating in the deep valley. The mendicant monk smacked his over seventy-pound iron Buddhist staff toward Xiang Wentian’s waist. Xiang Wentian bent forward and swung his iron horizontally barely above the ground simultaneously. By the time the Buddhist staff passed by from above his head, his iron chain also swept toward the mendicant monk’s right ankle. The mendicant monk had put great strength into the smack and could not draw the staff back in time to block the iron chain; having no other choice, he leapt upward to dodge it. But Xiang Wentian’s iron chain suddenly turned around, wrapped around the mendicant monk’s right ankle, and swung upward, following the mendicant monk’s upward momentum using his own force against him. The mendicant monk lost his balance at the landing and tottered forward only finding himself falling toward the bottomless abyss. With a snap of his wrist, Xiang Wentian unwrapped his iron chain from the mendicant monk’s ankle. Miserable screams echoed as the mendicant monk fell down and continued all the way down into the abyss, which made the hairs on the back of everybody’s neck standing on their ends as they took several steps back spontaneously.

The deadlock lasted for a good while until two men finally stepped forward. One had a pair of halberds and the other one was a monk, holding a crescent spade in his hands. The two men launched their attack shoulder to shoulder: the two halberds, one on the top and the other one below it, struck toward Xiang Wentian’s face and lower abdomen while the crescent spade struck forward aiming at his left rib cage. All three weapons were the heavy type, and with resourceful inner energy attached to them, they appeared to be ultra powerful. The two men had the landform in their minds when they launched the attack so that Xiang Wentian would not be able to dodge to the side and would have no

choice but to block the attack with his iron chain in a contest of strength. Sure enough, Xiang Wentian waved his iron chain and with three loud bangs, knocked the two halberds and the crescent spade back. Sparkles flew in all directions from all four weapons, proving that this round of fight was sheer strength against sheer strength and there was no room for any trickery. Loud cheers exploded in the audiences at once.

After their weapons were knocked aside by the iron chain, the two men launched another wave of attack. Three loud bangs exploded again as the four weapons collided with each other. Both the monk and the man wobbled a few times from the collision of the forces, but Xiang Wentian stood firmly, and before his enemies even had a chance to take a breather, Xiang Wentian roared in a deafening voice, striking out his iron chain rapidly. In a hurry, the two men each raised his weapon to block. Three deafening bangs broke out once again, short and quick. The monk snarled loudly and threw his crescent spade to his side, when all of a sudden blood spurted out from his mouth. The other man raised his two halberds and stabbed them toward Xiang Wentian. Instead of blocking the approaching halberds, Xiang Wentian squared his shoulders and laughed out loud. When the tips of the halberds were still half a foot from Xiang Wentian's chest, they suddenly sank weakly, and following the fall of the halberds, the man also fell forward to the ground and became motionless. Turned out that he had been shaken to death by Xiang Wentian's overwhelming strength. The many people gathered in front of the gorge stared at each other in terror and none had the courage to step up.

"Little brother, we'll just drag it on with them. Why don't you sit down and have a rest?" Xiang Wentian suggested.

At that word, he sat down himself, embracing his own knees into his arms and casting not a glance toward the crowd.

"Audacious devil, how dare you belittle all the worldly heroes like that?" Someone suddenly spoke loudly.

Naked blades in their hands, four Taoist Priests stepped out from the crowd and walked in front of Xiang Wentian, all four swords turning crosswise in

unison. “Get up, let’s fight!” they yelled.

“What did Xiang Wentian do to have provoked your Emei School?” Xiang Wentian said coldly with a sneer.

“Evil demons and heretics are misfortunes of the Martial World. We Taoist Priests believe in cultivation of moral character and promotion of righteousness. Eradicating the wicked and destroying the evil is our duty,” a Taoist Priest on the left stated.

“Eradicating the wicked and destroying the evil is your duty, indeed! Look at the people behind you. Half of them are members of the ‘Demon’s Cult,’ why aren’t you eradicating the wicked and destroying the evil?” Xiang Wentian mocked with a grin.

“The principle culprit first!” the Taoist Priest answered.

But Xiang Wentian remained his sitting position, his knees in his arms. “Oh, I see. Very well, very well!” he said as he held up his head and stared at the floating clouds indifferently.

Suddenly Xiang Wentian leapt up in a loud roar and swung his iron chain, which swept toward the four men’s waist speedily like a mounting dragon. This surprise attack came so abruptly and would have worked if the four Taoist Priests weren’t top-notch fighters of the Emei School. Hastily, three Taoist Priests planted their long swords downward in front of their waists while the fourth Taoist Priest on the right most thrust his sword directly at Xiang Wentian’s throat.

“Clank!” the three long swords bent all together from the iron chain’s heavy strike while Xiang Wentian inclined his head and avoid the stab from the forth sword. Waving his sword about swiftly, the fourth Taoist Priest immediately followed with three incessant sword attacks, which stalled Xiang Wentian just long enough, while the rest three Taoist Priest retreated back and rejoined the battle after replacing their long swords. The sword moves from the four Taoist Priests coordinated with each other as though they had put up a small sword formation. Four swords fluttered gracefully in the air, gathering in one second

then dividing in the next.

Linghu Chong watched the fight for a little while and soon realized that Xiang Wentian had to move both of his hands together every time when he waved the iron chain about, which was far slower compared to the agility he would have achieved had he been able to moving his hands freely, and as the fight dragged on longer, a defeat would be simply inevitable. Taking a step forward from Xiang Wentian's right side, he thrust his sword out, aiming toward a Taoist Priest's ribs. The direction and position of the thrust was most peculiar. The Taoist Priest had no way of evading it, and with a slight thump, he took a hit on the side of his body.

At that exact instant, a thought flashed by Linghu Chong's mind like a lightning, "I've heard that people of the Emei School has always preserved their moral integrity with an extremely fine reputation, paying no attention to other people's business in the Martial World. I'll help Mr. Xiang out of the predicament, but I shall not kill the Taoist Priest."

So as soon as the tip of his sword pierced the Taoist Priest's skin, Linghu Chong pulled his sword back at once. But because of this hard pull out of a sudden impulse, the sword move became deficient, and to his surprise, the Taoist Priest brought his elbow inward in an attempt to hold the long sword under his arms with force in spite of the great pain. Linghu Chong gave the sword a tug and the blade of the sword instantly left a long cut on the man's arm and the side of his body, but because of this slight holdup, another Taoist Priest's long sword had already struck over and smacked onto Linghu Chong's sword.

Linghu Chong felt his entire arm going numb and almost let go of the sword, but knowing that without his sword, he would have become a disabled person, he held onto the sword handle desperately as waves of force reached him through the long sword and crushed toward his heart channel in multiple bursts.

When the first Taoist Priest took a stab under his arms, the injury had not been very serious, but then when he brought his elbow inward to hold the long sword with his arms, Linghu Chong's tug created a cut so deep that even his bones

were exposed. Blood spurted out from the wound, which basically forced him out of the fight. The rest two Taoist Priest were both behind Linghu Chong's back by now, fighting a fierce battle with Xiang Wentian. The two Taoist Priests had fine and marvelous swords moves, and the two swords worked in coordination, putting up an extremely tight defense shield.

In every few moves, Xiang Wentian would take a step backward, thus after ten steps or so, his entire body was already inside the white mist. But the two Taoist Priests kept charging forward, and soon the front half of their long swords also disappeared in the heavy mist.

"Watch out! It's the Iron Chain Bridge down there," someone in the crowd suddenly shouted out, but that was too late. The two Taoist Priest screeched in terror as both of them plunged forward into the white mist, obviously being pulled forward involuntarily by Xiang Wentian. Sound of scream sank rapidly into the valley and fell silent only seconds later.

Laughing out loudly, Xiang Wentian emerged out from behind the white mist, but his laughter halted abruptly when he caught sight of a tottering Linghu Chong.

Back at the pavilion, the four Taoist Priests of the Emei School had witnessed how Linghu Chong injured his opponents one after another with the "Dugu Nine Swords" and knew very well that they would be no match for him in a contest of sword arts. But they were also able to tell that Linghu Chong's inner strength was plain ordinary. Now when the Taoist Priest shot his inner strength toward Linghu Chong wave after wave, even if Linghu Chong were still in the same state of health before he was injured, his cultivation of inner strength would have been very shallow, after all, due to limited amount of training, and would have stood no change against the Taoist Priest's over thirty years worth of inner strength cultivation using the breathing techniques of the Emei School, much less that Linghu Chong had lost all his inner strength. Fortunately, he had abundant other people's inner energy inside him, which enabled him to withstand the energy attack for a little while and protected him from an instant injury. However, he still felt the energy streams inside him rolling and clashing

against each other over and over as golden sparks twinkled in front of his eyes. Suddenly, he felt a stream of hot energy penetrating his back through the "Da-Zhui Acupoint" and the stress coming from his hand lightened at once.

Linghu Chong's spirit surged. He knew that Xiang Wentian must have lent him a helping hand. Then he immediately realized that Xiang Wentian had redirected the attacking energy force downward so it would flow from his arm to his waist, then to his heels, and eventually dissolving into the ground.

The Taoist Priest felt the sudden dissolution of his attacking energy force. He let out a loud yell and leapt backward, withdrawing his own sword.

"It's the Evil Art of Essence Absorbing! It's the Evil Art of Essence Absorbing!" he cried out loud.

At the mentioning of the phrase "Evil Art of Essence Absorbing," many in the crowd changed their countenances.

"That's right! It's the Magical Art of Essence Absorbing. Now who else is interested to try it out?" Xiang Wentian said with a broad grin.

"Could that Ren…Ren…have come out again?" the Demon's Cult Elder with a yellow waistband muttered in a croaked voice. "Let's report back to the Chief and let him decide," he ordered.

The Demon's Cult members acknowledged the command in chorus and all turned around to leave. After a short moment, half of the crowd of several hundred people had dispersed away. The rest people of the orthodox schools talked among themselves in whispers for a little while, and then also began to disperse one after another. In the end, only a dozen or so people remained.

"Xiang Wentian, Linghu Chong! By using the Evil Art of Essence Absorbing, you have sunk beyond redemption. Hereafter, when fellow members of the Martial World cope with the two of you, we no longer restrict ourselves to only just means. You have only yourselves to blame for such a consequence. I hope you won't regret today when that happens," a clear voice declared.

"When did I ever regret for what I did? Are you saying that it is actually a just

means for the several hundreds of you to jointly attack the two of us? How funny is that! Ha-ha!" Xiang Wentian replied in laughter.

Sounds of footsteps rose and soon the remaining dozen or so people also vanished from sight. Xiang Wentian inclined the head and listened carefully. When he was sure that the enemies had indeed walked away, he whispered to Linghu Chong.

"I bet you these bastards will come back in no time. Come here and get on my back."

Seeing the solemn expression on Xiang Wentian's face, Linghu Chong decided to simply comply without asking any questions and climbed onto Xiang Wentian's back. To his slight astonishment, Xiang Wentian bent down, extended his left foot forward slowly, and began walking down the deep valley.

Xiang Wentian swung his iron chain out and wrapped the end of it around a tree bough by the edge of the cliff that protruded beyond the cliff. After verifying that the bough was strong enough to hold the combined weight for both of them, he jumped down gently, and the two of them were now hanging in the midair. Xiang Wentian swung back and forth a few times. As soon as he found a spot to set his feet, he snapped his wrist with a reverse swing, which unwrapped the iron chain from the bough. After pressing down on the mountain wall with his hands to stabilize himself for a brief second, Xiang Wentian immediately swung out the iron chain again, and this time, it wrapped around a protruding rock underneath them, thus, they were able to descend another ten feet. Using the same technique, the descended further and further down the deep valley. Sometimes when there was only bare mountain wall without any trees or protruding rocks, Xiang Wentian would then run the risk by keeping his body close to the mountain wall and simply slide downward. Each slide would run about one hundred feet. As the slide accelerated, as soon as Xiang Wentian saw a spot that could be used to leverage the slide, he would use his outstanding Kung Fu skills, sometimes striking down with his palms, sometimes stomping with his feet, to slow down the slide.

This was certainly a very stunning experience for Linghu Chong. The danger

and risk of sliding down the cliff was really no less than the danger and risk in the fierce battle a moment ago. This kind of experience was indeed peculiar and risky to the extreme. If he had not met an eccentric like Xiang Wentian, it probably would never happen in one hundred incarnations. So when Xiang Wentian's feet touched the bottom of the valley in the end, he was actually slightly disappointed and wished that the valley were another thousand feet deeper. He looked up at the top of the valley. The stone beam looked like a thin blurry shadow, and white clouds concealed everything else.

"Mr. Xiang…," Linghu Chong said, but Xiang Wentian reached his hand out quickly and covered Linghu Chong's mouth while pointing his right index finger upwards.

Linghu Chong understood at once. The enemies must have returned. But when he looked up as far as he could, he didn't see any shadow on the stone beam.

Xiang Wentian drew his arm back. Placing his ear right next to the mountain wall, he listened attentively. After quite a while, he finally said with a grin, "God damn it! Some are taking guards while some others are searching all over the place." Turning toward Linghu Chong, he goggled at him for a moment and then spoke again, "You are an apprentice of a famous, orthodox school. I, on the other hand, am a so-called evil heretic. The two sides have always been mortal enemies. Why were you willing to offend your friends at the orthodox schools and come to save my life with no regard for your own safety?"

"I just happened to be at the place at the nick of time and were able to join forces with you, Mr. Xiang, and contended with the many elite fighters of both the orthodox schools and the Demon's Cult. I had not expected to come through this alive. I must have had incredible luck on my side. What you said about me saving your life is really…well, well…is really…," Linghu Chong replied.

"Is really rubbish, isn't it?" Xiang Wentian finished the sentence for him.

"I dare not say Mr. Xiang is talking rubbish. But it would be completely incorrect if you say that I saved your life," Linghu Chong answered.

“Xiang Wentian never goes back on his own words! I said that you saved my life, then you did save my life,” Xiang Wentian concluded.

Linghu Chong let out a smile and did not argue.

“Just now, those god damned bastards kept yelling about the ‘Magical Art of Essence Absorbing’ and were scared out of their wits. Do you know what kind of Kung Fu this ‘Magical Art of Essence Absorbing’ is? And why are they so afraid of it?” Xiang Wentian asked.

“Linghu Chong, a junior, is just about to ask for your advice, Mr. Xiang,” Linghu Chong replied.

“Drop the junior, senior, elder, mister crap, will you? That’s really getting on my nerves. You can simply call me Brother Xiang, and I’ll call you Brother Linghu,” Xiang Wentian said with a frown.

“Linghu Chong dare not do so,” Linghu Chong declined.

“I see! You despise me because I am part of the Demon’s Cult. You’ve saved my life, but my life is the least concern on my mind. If you despise me, we can dispute this over a fight,” Xiang Wentian exclaimed angrily. Though he spoke these words in a muffled voice, the anger blazing on his face clearly showed his irritation.

“There’s no need for a fight. If Brother Xiang insists, of course I’ll comply,” Linghu Chong replied with a beam. He thought to himself, “Didn’t I make friends with the evil rapist Tian Boguang? Might as well add Xiang Wentian to my list of friends. This man was free and easy and holds the characteristics of a true man. I’ve always liked people with such demeanors.” At that thought, he bowed down and saluted Xiang Wentian, saying, “Brother Xiang, I salute you.”

Xiang Wentian’s face split into a wide smile. “Just bear in mind that you are the only sworn brother Xiang Wentian ever had in the entire world,” he added.

“I am extremely flattered!” Linghu Chong grinned.

According to the tradition in the Martial World, when two men became sworn brothers, they should at least get on their knees, pinch some soil in front of them

in place of the incense sticks, and then swear an oath along the line of sticking together through thick and thin and sharing weal and woe. But since both of them were the unconventional type, and after going through this fierce battle together, each found the other congenial with the utmost sincerity, neither bothered about the over elaborate formalities. Once they called each other a sworn brother, then sworn brothers they were.

Xiang Wentian was a member of the Demon's Cult, but there were very few fellow cult members he would think much of. Having made Linghu Chong his sworn brother, he found himself in a state of bliss.

"Too bad we don't have any wine here, or else we could have drunk twenty or thirty bowls of god damned liquor to celebrate!" Xiang Wentian grumbled.

"Absolutely!" Linghu Chong immediately agreed. "My throat had been itching madly from the cravings. Now that you mentioned it, it only got worse."

"Those bastards haven't left yet. I guess we'll just have to hold out for a few days at the bottom of the valley," Xiang Wentian suggested, pointing his finger upward. "Brother, just now, when that cow-nose of the Emei School attacked you with his inner energy, what happened to the cow-nose's inner energy force when I helped you with my inner strength?" he asked.

"Brother Xiang, I felt as though you redirected that Taoist Priest's inner energy force into the ground," Linghu Chong answered.

"Yes, yes!" Xiang Wentian smacked his own thigh in excitement. "Brother, your comprehension is excellent. This Kung Fu of mine was something I created by chance and nobody else in the Martial World knew about it. I gave it a name and called it the 'Minor Art of the Energy Absorbing to the Ground'."

"That's a strange name!" Linghu Chong uttered.

"Well," Xiang Wentian explained, "that's because the 'Magical Art of Essence Absorbing' can change the countenance on anyone's face in the Martial World just by the sound of it, and this Kung Fu of mine would pale into utter insignificance in comparison with it. That's why I had to call it a 'Minor Art.' This Kung Fu of mine only utilizes simple techniques to graft one twig on

another and redirects the opponent's attacking inner force to the ground instead of causing any harm. I don't have the least gain from it, myself. Besides, this Kung Fu is only useful when the opponent is attacking with his inner energy and can't be used to attack in offense. At the time when the opponent suddenly felt that his inner energy was discharging in a steady stream, undoubtedly he would turn pale with fright, but it doesn't take long for that amount of inner energy to regenerate. Why was I so sure that they would definitely return? Because as soon as the cow-nose found out that he didn't really lose any bit of his essence, he would know that my 'Minor Art of Energy Absorbing to the Ground' is only bluffing and there's nothing dreadful about it. I never liked playing deceiving tricks, that's why I never used it before."

"Xiang Wentian never deceives people, but for his sworn brother's sake, he made an exception today," Linghu Chong grinned.

"Nah, I wouldn't say that I never deceive people. But for insignificant players like that Priest Song-Wen, I would really disdain to deceive him," Xiang Wentian showed a grin before continuing. "If I want to deceive someone for some reason, it has to be something huge, something earthshaking, something everybody will be talking about afterwards."

At those words, the two of them broke into laughter. Even though they held their laughter low so as not to be heard by the enemy above, but the laugh was thoroughly delighted.

Chapter 19: The Wager

Translated by Lanny Lin



Mr. Black-White extended his index finger and middle finger rapidly and gripped towards the blade of the thrusting sword. The five spectators couldn't help letting out a cry of surprise.

By now both of them were very exhausted, and each took a spot to sit in repose with their eyes closed, leaning against a big rock. Soon Linghu Chong began to doze off. In the sleep, he suddenly saw Ying-Ying placing three roasted frogs into his hands and asking him, “Have you forgotten me?”

“I have not! I have not! Where…where have you been?” Linghu Chong

replied loudly. But all of a sudden, Ying-Ying's image vanished before his eyes. "Don't go! I have a lot to tell you," he shouted hastily. But all he could see now were countless of knives, swords, and various weapons striking toward him one after another. He cried out loudly and then woke up.

"Have you dreamed of your sweetheart and had a lot to tell her?" Xiang Wentian said with a big grin.

Linghu Chong's face went red. He wasn't sure what else he had said in his dream that Xiang Wentian might also overheard.

"Brother, if you want to see your lover, you'll have to recuperate your injury and cure yourself before going looking for her," Xiang Wentian suggested.

"I…I don't have a lover. Besides, my injury is incurable," Linghu Chong replied, his face looking gloomy.

"I owe you a life. Although you are my sworn brother, it still doesn't feel right, and I simply must repay you with a life. I'll take you to a place. There, you will be cured," Xiang Wentian exclaimed.

Linghu Chong had long disregarded his own life, but that was really because he didn't have a choice after all and had to treat it with indifference. Now when he heard Xiang Wentian saying that his injury was actually curable, a mixed feeling of hope and bliss began swelling in his chest. If these words had come out of someone else's mouth, he would not have let his hope go up. But Xiang Wentian was a man with extraordinary abilities, and his Kung Fu skills were so amazing that other than Grand Uncle-Master Feng, Linghu Chong had not seen anyone possessing such exceptional skills. Even a casual remark from him could have weighed more than a thousand pounds.

"I…I…," Linghu Chong murmured but found himself lost in word from the sudden surge of spirit.

By now, the crescent shaped moon had climbed up the opening of the valley and shone over it silently, casting rays of cold light into the bottom of the valley. Although the valley bottom still looked dark and gloomy, in Linghu Chong's eyes, everything seemed to have brightened up all of a sudden as though it was

sunshine everywhere.

"We'll go see a man. But this man has a very eccentric temperament, so it's better that we don't let him know beforehand. Brother, if you trust me, just let me arrange everything," Xiang Wentian explained.

"What's there to not trust? Brother Xiang, your trying to cure my injury is just like that old saying, 'Working on curing a dead horse as though the horse was still alive.' It was a hopeless thing to start with anyway. If it can be cured, then praise the lord! If it can't be cured, then it is just the way it should have been."

Xiang Wentian licked his lips at these words. "I wonder where we dropped that horse leg. God dammit! We killed so many bastards, and there's not even a single one down here."

From the expression on Xiang Wentian's face, Linghu Chong could tell that he must be thinking about finding some corpses for food. Gasping with astonishment, he dared not say another word and closed his eyes to sleep.

The next morning, Xiang Wentian said, "Brother, other than moss and grass, there's nothing here. If we stay here and drag on like this, we've got to find some dead corpses for food. But the ones that fell down the valley yesterday were all old and stringy. I think your won't have too good of an appetite eating those."

"I won't have any appetite at all," Linghu Chong replied hurriedly.

Xiang Wentian grinned. "Then we'll have to find a way out of here. Let me change your looks a little bit."

He scooped some slime from the ground and smeared it onto Linghu Chong's face. Then he put his hands on his own chins and rubbed. As soon as his inner strength radiated out from his palms, his long beards began falling off completely. Next, he placed his hands on his own head and rubbed, and soon all the gray hair on his head also fell off entirely, turning his head into a shinny, bald head.

Within moments, he had changed his appearance completely. Linghu Chong

found it amusing yet amazing. Xiang Wentian scooped some more slime and then made his nose bigger, his chins chubbier. Now even if someone looked at Xiang Wentian carefully face to face, he would still have a difficult time recognizing him.

Xiang Wentian leading the way, they began looking for a way out of the valley. Xiang Wentian put his hands together and hid them in the sleeves, which also covered up the iron chain tied around his wrists. As long as he didn't draw his hands out, nobody would have been able to recognize that this bald fatty was actually the hale, hearty, and degage Xiang Wentian.

The two of them explored the valley from one side to the other, and by noon, they caught sight of a small, wild peach tree in a small col. Even though the peaches were far from ripe and tasted sour and astringent, they couldn't care less and each had a stomach full. After resting for about two hours, they resumed their walk. By the time of dusk, Xiang Wentian finally found the right place to get out of the valley, only that they had to climb over a precipice a few hundred feet high. Xiang Wentian carried Linghu Chong on his back and then climbed upward.

After they climbed up the cliff, a small path appeared in front of their eyes, winding through the long grasses covering the wild country land. Although the scenery was bleak, at least they had gotten out of the tight spot where even traces of wild birds or animals were lacking, and both heaved a long sigh of relieve.

The next morning, they traveled east. When they finally arrived at a good-sized town, Xiang Wentian took out a piece of Golden Leaf[64] from his chest pocket and asked Linghu Chong to exchange that into silver at a local money market. When that was all taken care of, they put up at an inn. Xiang Wentian ordered a lavish feast and also asked the servant to bring out a big jar of wine. The two of them both drank to heart's content until over half jar of the wine had gone. Then without paying any attention to the food on the table, one simply fell asleep at the table while the other one fell into a fuddle and passed out in bed. Not until the next morning when the warm sunshine had covered the full

window did they wake up one after another. They exchanged a few grins as they recollected the fierce fight inside the pavilion and on the stone beam, almost feeling as though those events had only happened in their last incarnation.

"Brother, you wait here. I'll be right back," Xiang Wentian said.

But Xiang Wentian did not return until over two hours later. Linghu Chong was just starting to worry, fearing that he might have encountered enemies, when Xiang Wentian reappeared with many packages in various sizes in his hands and under his arms. The iron chain that had shackled around his waists also disappeared. He must have asked a blacksmith to chisel it off. Xiang Wentian opened the packages. It turned out each and every one of them contained luxurious garments and apparels.

"We'll disguise into rich merchants. The more extravagant, the better," Xiang Wentian explained.

The two of them changed into the brand new clothes from inside out completely. When they walked outside, the inn servant lead two tall horses in bright saddles and bridles to them which apparently Xiang Wentian had also just purchased. They traveled slowly further east on horsebacks. After two days into the journey, Linghu Chong had already felt worn out, so Xiang Wentian hired a horse-drawn wagon for him to ride in. After arriving by the Grand Canal,[65] they simply gave up the idea of traveling by horse and hired a boat, traveling south by water, instead.

Along the journey, Xiang Wentian kept the spending spree, as though he had infinite number of Golden Leaves with him. After they crossed the Yangtze River, more and more markets and shops bustled along both banks of the canal. The apparels Xiang Wentian purchased also turned more and more extravagant. During the long days spent on the boat, Xiang Wentian told many anecdotes and tales of the Martial World, most of which were stories Linghu Chong had never heard of before and brought great gusto out of him. But if there was anything relating the Dark-Wood Cliff or concerning matters of the Demon's Cult, Xiang Wentian would not mention any word of it, and Linghu Chong would not ask any question, either.

This day, they arrived outside the city of Hangzhou. With extra attention, Xiang Wentian worked on the disguises of Linghu Chong and himself one more time before getting off the boat, then after acquiring two fine horses, they rode into the city of Hangzhou.

The city of Hangzhou, which used to have the name of Lin-An, was the capital city during the Southern-Song Dynasty, and had always been a great place for residence. As soon as they entered the city, they were greeted by boisterous pedestrians crowding the streets shoulder to shoulder while faint music and songs from alleys and courtyards echoing faintly in the background. Linghu Chong followed Xiang Wentian until they had arrived at the bank of the West Lake, and what greeted his eyes were a beautiful slate of blue water reflecting the blue sky like a huge mirror and the many weeping willows stroking the lake surface with their long soft branches. The magnificent beauty of the scenery could have easily made one wonder if he had just stepped in a fairyland.

“I’ve heard many people say: Suzhou and Hangzhou are Heavens on earth. I’ve never been to Suzhou so have no idea about it. Today, after seeing the West Lake with my own eyes, I have to agree that using Heaven on earth to describe its beauty is certainly no exaggeration,” Linghu Chong exclaimed.

Xiang Wentian showed a smile as his reply and then led Linghu Chong to a remote corner, which, with a small hill on one side and a long causeway separating it from the outer lake on the other, seemed even more secluded and peaceful. The two of them dismounted their horses and then after tying the reins to the willow trees by the bank, they ascended the flight of stone steps leading up the small hill. It seemed as though Xiang Wentian had returned to a formerly visited place and was very familiar with the pathways. After several turns, suddenly, there were plum trees everywhere. Aged boughs slanted to the side with dense branches and leaves on the top, making one wonder what a splendid view it would be in the early spring when they were all covered in the countless of beautiful, snow-white plum blossoms.

They walked through the large stretch of plum forest and then followed the main stone slab path. Soon a large manor with a red gate and white walls came

into their view. Once they came closer, Linghu Chong could see two large characters, “Plum Manor,” written outside of the gate; and by the side, the words “signed by Yu Yunwen” were inscribed in smaller fonts. Even though Linghu Chong did not have much education and didn’t know that Yu Yunwen was the famous Southern-Song general that had defeated Jin’s invading army, he could still sense the vigorous, heroic spirit behind the elegant and graceful handwriting.

Xiang Wentian stepped forward and grabbed onto the shiny copper ring hanging from the gate. “Leave everything to me,” he turned his head over his shoulder and whispered.

Linghu Chong nodded, thinking to himself, “This Plum Manor obviously is the residence of a very rich family in the city of Hangzhou. Could this have been the home of an exceptional doctor?” Then he heard Xiang Wentian knocking on the gate using the copper ring. He knocked four times at first then paused for a moment before knocking twice again. Then after another short pause, he knocked five times, then another pause before three more knocks. Letting go of the copper ring, Xiang Wentian took a step back and waited.

After a while, the gate opened slowly, and two old men in servant’s clothes walked out abreast. Linghu Chong felt a slight shock at the sight of the two old men. Their eyes shining with sharp stares and their steps steady and firm, apparently both of them had excellent Kung Fu. Why would they allow themselves to be employed to such lowly posts as servants? Linghu Chong couldn’t help but ask himself inwardly.

“May I ask what business has brought you to our humble manor?” the man on the left asked with a slight bow.

“Members of the Songshan School and the Huashan School would like to request an audience with the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan,[66] the four respectful Manor Masters,” Xiang Wentian said.

“The Manor Masters do not wish to receive any guests,” the man replied and made for closing the gate, but Xiang Wentian took something out of his chest

pocket and then opened it up.

Linghu Chong felt another shock. Inside Xiang Wentian's hand was a brocade flag in five colors stubbed with shining pearls and precious gemstones, and in the bight sunlight they twinkled magnificently. Linghu Chong knew that this flag was the Five Mountains Sword Alliance Command Flag of the Songshan School's Chief Zuo, and wherever the flag showed up, it was as if Chief Zuo had also come, himself, and all members of the Five Mountains Sword Alliance would hold the carrier of the Command Flag to the highest esteem and follow his command strictly.

Linghu Chong faintly felt that this was inappropriate. He was almost sure that Xiang Wentian must have not obtained the flag through proper means. Maybe he had killed some important members of the Songshan School and then had robbed the flag of him, and maybe the flag was the very reason why orthodox school members chased after him. Now he claimed to be a member of the Songshan School, what kind of scheme was he planning to pull? But since Linghu Chong had agreed to let him arrange everything, he had no choice but to maintain his silence and observe by the side.

At the sight of the Command Flag, the two servants' countenance changed slightly. "The Command Flag of Songshan School's Chief Zuo?" they muttered together.

"Yes, it is," Xiang Wentian confirmed.

"The Four Playfellows of Jiangnan and the Five Mountains Sword Alliance never had the chance to make the acquaintance. Even if Songshan School's Chief Zuo had come, himself, our Masters wouldn't necessarily…necessarily… well!" the servant on the right replied. He didn't finish his sentence, but everyone knew what he meant: "Even if Chief Zuo had come, himself, our Masters wouldn't necessarily grant an audience just the same."

Chief Zuo of the Songshan School was, after all, a man of high post and high prestige, and the man did not want to say anything contemptuous. But he apparently considered the status of the "Four Playfellows of the Jiangnan" to be

much higher compared to that of the Chief Zuo.

"Who are these 'Four Playfellows of Jiangnan'? Suppose they really have such prestigious status in the Martial World, why have I never heard Master or Master-Wife mention their names? And when I wondered about the Martial World, I've heard people talking about many exceptional senior masters, how come I've never heard the name 'Four Playfellows of Jiangnan' mentioned before?" Linghu Chong couldn't help but ponder.

"This Command Flag of My Nephew-Apprentice Zuo was only good for bluffing. The four senior masters of Jiangnan are all prestigious masters. Of course they would think nothing of this small flag…." Xiang Wentian showed a slight grin and put the Command Flag back into his chest pocket.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "'Nephew-Apprentice Zuo'? Are you actually pretending to be Chief Zuo's Uncle-Master? This is really getting out of hands."

"I've never had the privilege of paying a formal visit to the four respectful masters of Jiangnan, I just thought that this Command Flag might be used as a token of verification," Xiang Wentian continued.

"Oh," the two servants acknowledged. Hearing how Xiang Wentian had really elevated the position of the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan in his speech, both eased up in the face.

"Are you Chief Zuo's Uncle-Master?" one man asked.

"Yes, I am!" Xiang Wentian let out another grin. "I am only a nobody in the Martial World; naturally you would never have heard about me. But I've long heard abut the great feats you have accomplished. Brother Ding, that year at the foot of Mount Qilian, didn't you single-handedly wipe out the entire band of four tyrants and subdued two prestigious Kung Fu masters with a single swing of your sword? And Brother Shi, didn't your Eight-Diagram Golden Saber drink the blood of the Green-Dragon Clan's all thirteen ringleaders on the Han River in Hubei Province just so that you could save the life of an orphan? Such feats are definitely hard to forget."

The two men in servant's clothes were named Ding Jian and Shi Lingwei respectively. Before retiring to the Plum Manor, they had been two ruthless figures in the Martial World, chivalrous sometimes and wicked some other times. They had one thing in common: seldom had they revealed their names in the many battles they had fought. Consequently, despite their extraordinary martial art skills few had heard of their names. The two incidents Xiang Wentian just brought up were none other than what they had considered the true masterpiece in their lives. In both cases, their opponents had been elite Kung Fu masters and they had to fight many enemies alone, nevertheless each of them claimed a neat victory. Besides, they had been the chivalrous heroes upholding justice while their opponents were the villains in both incidents, which had been very rare occurrences throughout their lives. Generally when someone performs a good deed, even though he wouldn't go out of his way to publicize it, he would still feel utterly pleased if others learn about it accidentally. Both Ding and Shi's faces lit up at Xiang Wentian's words.

"Such trivial matters really do not worth mentioning. Mister, your knowledge of the Martial World is very impressive," Ding Jian spoke with a faint smile.

"The Martial World certainly does not lack people who fish for fame and compliment, but lofty gentlemen with genuine abilities and learning that would rather remain anonymous after doing great deeds are very hard to come by," Xiang Wentian continued. "I've always admired the great fame of 'Straight Line Lightning Sword' Brother Ding and 'Wulu God' Brother Shi. When Nephew-Apprentice Zuo mentioned about consulting the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan in regard to certain matters, I agreed to make the trip to Hangzhou. I figured that even if I might not have the luck to meet the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan, as long as I get to meet the 'Straight Line Lightning Sword' and the 'Wulu God,' it would have been a worthy trip. Nephew-Apprentice Zuo said that if he had come, himself, he was afraid that the four senior masters might not want to receive him, having an aversion to the undeserved reputation he had attained in recent years. But in my case, since I usually stayed in and kept myself away from Martial World matters, maybe I won't look too repugnant in their eyes. Ha-ha! Ha-ha!"

Very pleased to hear Xiang Wentian flattering both the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan and the two of them, Ding and Shi also accompanied him with a few laughs. Although the bald fatty looked repulsive in appearance, his speech and demeanor showed great manner and elegance, which convinced Ding and Shi that he was not just any ordinary visitor. And since he was Zuo Lengchan's Uncle-Master, his Kung Fu skills had to be extraordinary. Ding and Shi felt their respect growing.

By then, Shi Lingwei had decided to report them to the Manor Masters. Turning toward Linghu Chong, he asked, "Is this mister a member of the Huashan School?"

"This is Brother Feng. He is the Uncle-Master of the current Huashan School Headmaster, Yue Buqun," Xiang Wentian replied swiftly before Linghu Chong had any chance to open his mouth.

From the much nonsense Xiang Wentian had made up, Linghu Chong had guessed that Xiang would vamp up a fake name and identity for him, but he had no idea that Xiang would make him the Uncle-Master of his own Master. Even though Linghu Chong was a man that did not care a rush, pretending to be a senior of his respectful Master made him very uneasy. He couldn't help but shudder. Luckily his face was covered under a thick layer of yellow powder, which effectively concealed his startled face.

Ding Jian and Shi Lingwei exchanged a suspicious stare, both thinking, "Although we can't tell this man's true age, he is most likely under forty. How could he be Yue Buqun's Uncle-Master?"

Xiang Wentian had made Linghu Chong look much older with the help of the disguise. However, Linghu Chong still looked far from an aged man, and any excessive make up would have given him away completely.

"This Brother Feng here is actually younger than Yue Buqun, but he is the only disciple of apprentice brother Feng Qingyang and the only heir of apprentice brother Feng's unique sword arts. His skills in sword arts are so exceptional that few in the Huashan Sword School could be his match," Xiang Wentian

explained.

Once again, Linghu Chong found himself astounded. “How would Brother Xiang know that I am the disciple of Grand Uncle-Master Feng?” he pondered and found the answer only a moment later, “With his exceptional sword art skills, Grand Uncle-Master Feng must have had a prestigious fame in the Martial World many years ago. Brother Xiang is a very knowledgeable man. Once he saw the sword arts I used, naturally he was able to deduce the origin of the sword arts. If Great Master Fang-Sheng can recognize it, so can Brother Xiang.”

Ding Jian uttered a cry of surprise. He was an expert in swordsmanship, and upon learning that Linghu Chong was an excellent sword master, he itched for a contest. But the man standing in front of him had such a yellowish, swollen face and a completely wretched look, he had a hard time linking the man to an outstanding master in sword arts.

“May I have the honor to hear your names?” he asked.

“My surname is Tong, and my full name is Tong Huajin. This Brother Feng’s first name is Er-Zhong,” Xiang Wentian answered.

“We’ve been looking forward to meeting you for a long time.” Both Ding and Shi cupped their hands in greetings.

Xiang Wentian couldn’t help but chuckle inwardly. The name he made up, “Tong Huajin,” meant copper turning into gold, which, of course, clearly stated that it was fake. And the name “Er-Zhong” simply came from separating the two radicals in the character “Chong.” There was no one in the Martial World with any of those two names, yet the two of them still looked forward to meeting them. Why would they be looking forward to it, much less looking forward to it for a long time already?

“Please come in and have some tea while I report to my Masters. But whether our Masters will see you or not, I won’t promise anything,” Ding Jian said.

“Even though you humbly call yourselves servants of the Manor, you are more like intimate brothers to the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan. I am sure the four senior masters will not go against your suggestions,” Xiang Wentian said with a

grin.

Ding Jian returned with a grin, shifting to the side to make way, and Xiang Wentian stepped into the manor, followed closely by Linghu Chong. They walked through a big courtyard following the path, alongside which stood two aged plum trees, one on each side, their limbs extending vigorously in all directions. After entering the reception hall, Shi Lingwei invited the guests to be seated and stood by the side in accompany while Ding Jian went inside to report to the Manor Masters. Seeing that Shi Lingwei stood by the side, Xiang Wentian felt rather irreverent to remain sitting, himself. But Shi was a servant of the Plum Manor, and it would have been inappropriate for him to invite Shi to sit down. And then, he had an idea.

"Brother Feng," Xiang Wentian said to Linghu Chong, "Look at that painting there. Although it's made up of only a few simply strokes, it certainly depicts great momentum." At these words, he stood up and walked in front of the central scroll hung in the middle of the hall.

Having traveled alongside Xiang Wentian for many days, Linghu Chong knew very well that Xiang was not adept at painting and calligraphy despite his resourceful wits. Now when he suddenly began praising the painting, there had to be something more to it. At that thought, he acknowledged with a snort and also walked in front of the painting. The painting contained the drawing of a celestial man's back. It almost felt as though the ink on the painting was still dripping wet, clearly showing the powerful vigor of each of the strokes. Even though Linghu Chong was no expert in the art of painting, he could still tell that this had to be a true masterpiece. The autograph on the painting read, "Mr. Paint Splashing Paints In a Big Fuddle." These words were written in a very stern style, as though each brushstroke came from a prod or swing of a long sword.

"Brother Tong, I am very attracted to this word 'Fuddle' on the painting. It almost felt as though the painting and the writing contained some kind of very brilliant sword arts," after staring at the painting for some time, Linghu Chong commented. The brushstrokes in the writing and the gesture of the celestial man seemed to have reminded him of the sword arts carved on the rock wall in the

back cave atop the Cliff of Contemplation.

Before Xiang Wentian had a chance to reply, Shi Lingwei had already spoken out, “Mr. Feng is truly an expert in sword arts. Our Fourth Master said: He painted this painting after he became completely inebriated one day and unconsciously included the spirit of sword arts in the artwork. This is the best artwork he had ever created. Once he became sober, he could never paint anything like this again. Mr. Feng can actually make out the spirit of sword arts in the painting. Fourth Master will definitely think of you as a bosom friend. Please allow me to excuse myself so I can report this to him.” Beaming with joy, he went inside.

“Brother Feng, turned out you know the art of painting,” Xiang Wentian cleared his throat and said.

“I don’t know anything about painting. I was just making wild guesses, and happen to hit the target by accident. If this Mr. Paint wants to discuss the art of painting with me, I’ll end up making a fool out of myself,” Linghu Chong replied.

Suddenly a loud voice rose from outside the door, “Did he really, did he really recognize the spirit of sword arts in my painting? He must be a very insightful man. He must be!” Amid the clamor, a man entered the room, holding a wine cup in his left hand, his face tipsy and his long beard almost reaching all the way to his bosom.

Shi Lingwei followed right behind the man. In a hurry, he introduced, “These two guests are Mister Tong from the Songshan School and Mister Feng from the Huashan School. This is the Fourth Master of the Plum Manor, Mr. Paint. Fourth Master, as soon as this Mister Feng saw your Splash-Ink painting, he said that the painting contained brilliant sword arts.”

The Fourth Master, Mr. Paint, glanced at Linghu Chong up and down from the corner of his tipsy eyes. “You know painting? You know sword arts?” he suddenly asked. The two questions sounded very insolent and impolite.

Linghu Chong noticed that the wine cup in his hand was a jade green Emerald

Cup; he could also tell from the smell that the wine inside the cup was Pear-Blossom Wine. Suddenly, Zu Qianqiu's speech on the boat when they traveled in the Yellow River came to his mind.

"Bai Juyi wrote in his poem *Spring View of Hangzhou*, '*The red sleeves of the silk weaving girls reflected the persimmon leaves, and the emerald green flag of the wine shop sets off the Pear-Blossom Wine*.' To drink the Pear-Blossom Wine, Emerald Cup would be the natural choice. Fourth Master is truly an expert in the art of wine-drinking."

Linghu Chong did not have much education and knew little about poetry and literature. But being a very intelligent man, he was gifted with an extraordinarily retentive memory and could recite other people's words after hearing them over once. So easily, he copied Zu Qianqiu's exact words over.

Mr. Paint's eyes became wide open at these words. Suddenly he held Linghu Chong into his arms.

"Good heavens!" he cried out loud, "A bosom friend has arrived. Come! Follow me! Let's go drink at least three hundred cups. Brother Feng, I am addicted to the art of wine, the art of painting, and the art of sword. People call me Lord of the Three Arts. But among the three arts, the art of wine is at the top of the list. Art of painting is the second and art of sword is the last."

These words sounded like music in Linghu Chong's ears. "I know nothing about the art of painting," he thought to himself, "I've come to seek help in healing my injuries. It's the last thing I want to do to get into a sword fight with them. But drinking, that's just down my alley. What more could I have asked for?"

Without hesitation, he followed Mr. Paint inside followed by Xiang Wentian and Shi Lingwei. Down a winding corridor, they came to a room to the west, and as soon as the portiere was lifted, a strong fragrance of wine assailed their nostrils.

Linghu Chong had been fond of drinking since childhood. Only because his Master and Master-Wife hadn't given him much pocket money, he had not the

luxury to distinguish the good from the bad and simply drank whatever he could get. Not until he listened to Elder Bamboo-Green discussing the art of drinking in detail in the city of Luoyang, and was shown the many kinds of great wines, was he able to appreciate quality wines and the art of drinking. Firstly, this was congenial for him; secondly, he had a good teacher to give him directions. So as soon the scent of wine hit his nostrils, he praised.

"Wow! I smell the scent of aged High Grade Fen-Wine. Hmm, the Hundred-Grass Wine probably is around seventy-five years old. And that Monkey Wine is even harder to come by."

As soon as he recognized the aroma of the Monkey Wine, he instantly remembered Lu Dayou, his sixth apprentice brother, and sorrow swelled in his heart.

"Excellent! Excellent! Brother Feng, as soon as you stepped into my wine room, you have already recognized the best three brews in my collection. You are really an expert! Amazing! Amazing indeed!" Mr. Paint clapped his hands with a big smile blossoming on his face.

Linghu Chong glanced around the room. What met his eyes where wine jars, wine bottles, wine calabashes, and wine cups everywhere.

"I really doubt Senior Master's collection stops at the three great brews I've just mentioned. The Shaoxing-Red Wine is definitely first-class, and the Grape-Wine from the Western Region city Turfan,[67] which requires four cycles of distillation and ferments, is second to none in the entire world."

"My Turfan four cycles of distillation and ferments Grape-Wine is still sealed off in the wooden barrel. How could you have sniffed it out?" Mr. Paint uttered, half shocked and half pleased.

"Come on! With such quality wine, even if you hide it in a cellar twenty feet below ground, the sweet scent would still make it all the way here," Linghu Chong said with a grin.

"Right on! Let's drink this four cycles distillation and ferments Grape-Wine, then!" Mr. Paint shouted.

Soon, he took out a big barrel from a corner of the room. The barrel had begun to turn black from its old age and was covered with wriggling Western Region scripts. The wooden stopper was sealed off by sealing wax, which carried the sign of a solemn looking stamp. Mr. Paint held the wooden stopper and gave it a gentle pull. All of a sudden, the room was filled with the scent of great wine. Shi Lingwei was a man who never touched alcohol, and at the strong smell from the wine, he immediately felt tipsy. Mr. Paint waved him off with a grin.

"Go out! Go out! You don't want to get drunk, do you?"

Placing three wine cups in a row, he picked the barrel up and poured the wine toward the wine cups. The wine's color was dark red and almost looked like blood. When the cups were full, the top of the liquid was actually slightly higher than the edge of the cup, yet not a drop spilled out.

"This man has extraordinary Kung Fu skills," Linghu Chong couldn't help but cheer inwardly. "Holding the over one-hundred pounds big barrel in his arms and pouring wine into the small wine cups, he was still able to fill the cups perfectly to their capacities. That is no easy task."

"Cheers! Cheers!" Holding the wooden barrel under his right arm, he raised his wine cup with his left hand and stared at Linghu Chong's face with unblinking eyes, waiting to see his reaction after he tasted the wine.

Linghu Chong raised his own cup and then drank half of its content down his throat, smacking his lips as he tasted the flavor, his eyes closed. But because of the thick layer of powder on his face, the only express on his face was indifference, as though he didn't quite like the taste. Mr. Paint's face, on the other hand, had anxiety written all over it, as if he was afraid that this expert in wine-appreciation would only rate his wine mediocre.

After a long while, Linghu Chong finally opened his eyes. "Very strange! Very strange indeed!" he muttered.

"What's strange about it?" Mr. Paint asked.

"Well, this is so confusing. This is really beyond me," Linghu Chong

answered.

"You are saying…," Mr. Paint said, his eyes flickering with joy.

"I've only had the fortune to taste this wine once before, and that was in the city of Luoyang. Even though the wine was utterly mellow and pure, one could still feel the slight sourness in its flavor. According to a grandmaster in the art of wine, that was because of the bumping and jolting along the transportation route. With the four cycles distillation and ferments Turfan Grape-Wine, the more you move it, the more of the excellence will be impaired. There are many thousands of miles between Turfan and Hangzhou, but Senior Master's wine doesn't even have the slightest sourness in its flavor. Well…."

Mr. Paint broke into loud laughter, looking very pleased of himself.

"This is my utmost secret. I had to use three sword moves in exchange for the secret recipe from Moore Watson, the Western Region Swordsman. Do you want to hear it?"

"I am already perfectly satisfied for the chance to enjoy such wonderful wine. I certainly dare not to ask about Senior Master's secret recipe." Linghu Chong shook his head.

"Let's drink! Let's drink!" Mr. Paint filled the three wine cups once again. Linghu Chong's no desire for the secret recipe actually made his heart itch more. He couldn't help but mutter, "Actually the recipe is not worth a dime. It's amazingly simply, you know."

Linghu Chong knew that the less he desired to hear the secret, the more Mr. Paint would want to share it. So he shook his hands hurriedly.

"Senior Master, please, please don't speak the secret out. I can imagine that the three sword moves you gave out must have been no small matter. If I take away your secret recipe, which you had to pay a great price in exchange, so easily, I'll never feel right about it. It is well said that there's no receiving a reward without making a merit…."

"Didn't you drink with me? Didn't you recognize the origin of the wine?

That's plenty of merit already. You must listen to the secret recipe," Mr. Paint insisted.

"I feel great gratitude that Senior Master is willing to grant me an audience and bestow on me your most valuable wine collection. How could I…?"

"But I want to tell you. You can listen."

"This is Fourth Master's goodwill. Brother Feng, you need not decline," Xiang Wentian also chimed in.

"Exactly! Exactly!" Mr. Paint concurred. "Let me ask you. Can you tell how old the wine is?" he asked with all smiles.

Linghu Chong drank up his wine and tasted it carefully. After a long while he spoke again.

"There is another thing strange about this wine. It tastes like it's one hundred and twenty years old, yet it also tastes as though it is only twelve or thirteen years old. There's old flavor in the recent taste and there's also new flavor in the old taste. Comparing to normal, over one hundred years old wine, it seems to have a unique essence."

Xiang Wentian knitted his brows slightly as he thought to himself, "Now he has really made a fool of himself. There's over one hundred years difference between one hundred and twenty years and twelve or thirteen years. How could they be mentioned in the same breath?"

He was afraid that Mr. Paint would be displeased to hear these words, but quite to the contrary, the old fellow Mr. Paint broke into loud laughter, his long beard fluttering back and forth.

"Good brother! You are as sharp as a razor. That's exactly where the secret lies. Let me tell you. That Western Region Swordsman, Moore Watson, gave me ten barrels of one hundred and twenty years old Turfan Grape Wine that had gone through three cycles of distillation and ferments and had five fine horses carry them all the way to Hangzhou. And then I went through the fourth cycle of distillation and ferments and brewed one barrel of fine wine using the ten

barrels Grape Wine. If we count the days, that was exactly twelve and a half years ago. That's why the Grape Wine didn't go sour after such a long journey and why there's old flavor in the recent taste and new flavor in the old taste."

"That's why!" Xiang Wentian and Linghu Chong both put their hands together.

"Even if you were to use ten sword moves in exchange for the secret of making such wonderful wine, it would have been worth it. And you only had to use three moves. What a steal!" Linghu Chong added.

Mr. Paint was even more pleased. "Little brother, you really understand me well. At that time, both Big Brother and Third Brother grumbled about it and complained that by exchanging sword moves for wine brewing technique, I had let the secret of our Central Region unique skills into the Western Region. And even though Second Brother only smiled without saying anything, I bet he didn't approve it in his mind, either. Only you, little brother, understand that I've made a kill in this deal. Lets have a toast for that!"

Seeing that Xiang Wentian obviously didn't know anything about the art of drinking, he paid no more attention to him.

"Fourth Master, there's actually another way to enjoy this wine. Too bad we won't be able to at this moment," Linghu Chong said after drinking up another cup of wine.

"How? Why can't we?" Mr. Paint asked anxiously.

"Turfan is the hottest place in the world. I heard that when Great Master Xuan-Zang[68] journeyed to India to retrieve the true Buddhist Scriptures, he went by the Mountain of Blaze, which is exactly where Turfan is located," Linghu Chong explained.

"Yes. That place is very hot, indeed. In the summertime, even after you immerse yourself in a bucket of cold water, you'd still feel the unbearable heat. And in the wintertime, it'll freeze you to the bone. But just because of that, the grapes they produce there are out of the ordinary," Mr. Paint remarked.

"When I tasted this wine in the city of Luoyang, it was still very cold. That

grandmaster in the art of drinking brought out a big piece of ice and then set the wine cups on top of the ice. Once the wine was iced, it had a different kind of taste. It is already in the early summer now, that's why I said we wouldn't be able to taste it that way," Linghu Chong said.

"When I was in the Western Region, unfortunately it was in the summertime also. Moore Watson also mentioned about the wonderful taste of Iced Grape Wine. Little brother, that's easy. All you have to do is to stay in our Plum Manor for another half a year. Then when it is in the winter, we can taste the wine together," Mr. Paint suggested. After a short pause, he went on, his eyebrows slightly knitted, "But we'll have to wait for such a long time. What a torment!"

"It's a pity that there's no one here in Jiangnan who specializes in 'Icy Palm' or 'Cold-Wind Claw' the kind of Kung Fu that focuses on the negative principles, or else…," Xiang Wentian joined in.

"I've got it! I've got it!" before Xiang Wentian even finished his sentence, Mr. Paint had shouted out cheerfully. Setting the wine barrel down to the floor, he walked out of the room excitedly.

Linghu Chong cast a glance at Xiang Wentian with a stomach full of questions, but Xiang Wentian only grinned back in silence.

Not long after, Mr. Paint had returned, dragging a very tall and very thin, old man in black robe behind him.

"Second Brother, you've got to do me a favor this time no matter what," he pleaded.

Linghu Chong looked at the man. What he saw was a man with delicate features, only that his face looked unnaturally white as though the face of a corpse, which would send a chill down one's spine at the sight of it. After Mr. Paint introduced him, Linghu Chong learned that the old man was the Second Master of the Plum Manor, Mr. Black-White. His hair looked extremely black while his skin looked extremely white. They were certainly in sharp contrast.

"What favor?" Mr. Black-White asked in a cold tone.

“To demonstrate your Turning-Water-Into-Ice Kung Fu to these two good friends of mine,” Mr. Paint said.

“That’s just an insignificant skill not even worth mentioning. It would only make the true experts laugh,” Mr. Black-White said coldly, rolling his black eyeballs around the white of the eye as he spoke.

“Second Brother, to tell you the truth, this Brother Feng, here, said that if we ice the Turfan Grape Wine, it would have an interesting taste. But where the heck can I find ice in the middle of the summer?” Mr. Paint confessed.

“The wine is already very mellow and savory. There’s no need to ice it,” Mr. Black-White replied.

“Turfan is a place of sweltering heat…,” Linghu Chong explained.

“Totally! Very hot!” Mr. Paint added.

“”Although the grapes produced there are excellent, inevitably, they also carried some of the summer heat,” Linghu Chong went on.

“Totally! That’s of course!” Mr. Paint added again.

“The summer heat was then brewed into the wine. Though after one hundred years, the effect had reduced dramatically, the little bit of bitter is simply inevitable, after all,” Linghu Chong concluded.

“Totally! Totally! If you had not mentioned it, I would have thought that it was because the flame was too high at the time of the distillation. I’ve really blamed that royal cook wrongly,” Mr. Paint said.

“What royal cook?” Linghu Chong asked.

“Well, I was afraid to spoil the ten barrels of great wine with incorrect degree of heating at the time of the distillation, so I made a special trip to the imperial palace in Beijing and grabbed the royal cook to come back with me so he could make the fire and brew the wine for me.” Mr. Paint grinned.

“Making a mountain out of a molehill?” Mr. Black-White shook his head.

“I see,” Xiang Wentian cut in the conversation. “If it were for just ordinary

ones, it wouldn't matter much for them to have the bitterness in their drink. But Second Master and Fourth Master are lofty hermits that retreated to the lakeside of the scenic West Lake, completely different from the rough fellows in the Martial World. Once the wine is iced and rid of the roughness, then it would match perfectly with the status of the two lofty masters. It is just like the gamesmanship in the game of Go.[69] Combating with shear strength would only fall into the ninth grade of gamesmanship while masters in the first or second grade of gamesmanship would seek a contest of spirit and understanding…."

"You know the game of Go?" rolling his queer eyes once again, Mr. Black-White suddenly grabbed at Xiang Wentian's shoulder and asked eagerly.

"The game of Go is the favorite in my life. Unfortunately my skills are just ordinary. So I traveled all over the country in pursuit of Go manuals. Throughout the past thirty years, I've managed to memorize quite a few of the famous games of all ages," Xiang Wentian replied.

"Which famous games have you memorized?" Mr. Black-White asked excitedly.

"For example: The game Wang Zhi watched when he encountered celestial beings on Mount Decayed Helve,[70] the game Liu Zhongpu played against the Fairy Granny on Mount Li,[71] and the game Wang Jixin heard between the mother and the daughter-in-law fairy foxes[72]…."

Before he even finished, Mr. Black-White had begun shaking his head in disappointment. "Those are only myths. How can they be credible? And how could there be real game manuals from those myth stories?" At that word, he let go of Xiang Wentian's shoulder.

"Well, at first, I also thought these were just stories made up by busybodies, but twenty-five years ago when I saw the game manual for the game between Liu Zhongpu and the Fairy Granny of Mount Li with my own eyes and realized how pointed and profound each move was, nothing an ordinary person could have made up, that was when I believed whole heartedly that the myth story was real. Is Senior Master also fond of this game?"

Mr. Paint suddenly burst into an uncontrolled laugh, his long beard fluttered about once again.

“Why are you laughing?” Xiang Wentian asked.

“Didn’t you ask my Second Brother if he is fond of the game of Go? Ha-ha-ha! My Second Brother’s name is Mr. Black-White. You tell me if he likes the game or not. They way Second Brother loves the game of Go is just like how I love the art of drinking,” Mr. Paint said in amusement.

“Good heavens! Second Master, please excuse my random talk. That’s like displaying one’s slight skill before an expert,” Xiang Wentian said hurriedly.

“Did you really see the game manual for the game between Liu Zhongpu and the Fairy Granny of Mount Li?” Mr. Black-White asked. “I’ve seen recordings from ancient journals about this story. It said that Liu Zhongpu was the national champion at the time, but he lost miserably to a countryside granny at the foot of Mount Li and spat out several liters of blood from the frustration. That’s why this famous game manual was named the ‘Blood-Spitting Manual.’ Could this ‘Blood-Spitting Manual’ really exist in this world?”

When he first entered the room, his face had looked completely indifferent, but now it was covered with excitement.

“Twenty-Five years ago, I had the chance of reading it in the old residence of a well-known family in Chengdu, Szechwan. Because it was such a stunning battle, even after twenty-five years, I could still remember every single one of the entire one hundred and twelve moves,” Xiang Wentian elaborated.

“There are a total of one hundred and twelve moves? Why don’t you show it to me? Come on, let’s go to my game room to set it up,” Mr. Black-White proposed anxiously.

Mr. Paint stretched his arms out and blocked the way.

“Hold it! Second Brother, if you don’t make ice for me, see if I’ll ever let you leave,” he said as he took out a white china basin filled with clear water.

“Alas, each of the four brothers has his own ‘thing’ to be crazy about. It’s

hopeless," Mr. Black-White sighed.

He stretched out his right hand and inserted his index finger into the water. Only a short moment later, faint traces of white mist began rising from the water surface, and soon, hoar frost began forming along the edges of the basin. Before long, a thin layer of ice appeared at the water surface. The ice grew thicker and thicker and only minutes later, the water inside the basin had all turned into cold ice. Xiang Wentian and Linghu Chong both cheered loudly.

"I heard that the 'Violent Wind Finger' Kung Fu had been long lost in the Martial World. Who would have thought that the Second Master…?" Xiang Wentian said.

"This is not the 'Violent Wind Finger.' This is called the 'Profound Heavenly Finger,' which is a much more advanced Kung Fu in comparison with the truculent 'Violent Wind Finger' Kung Fu," Mr. Paint clarified promptly. Without any delay, he had placed four wine cups on top of the ice as he spoke and filled them with Grape Wine. Shortly afterwards, traces of white mist began rising from the surface of the wine.

"Now!" Linghu Chong said.

Picking up a wine cup, Mr. Paint tossed the wine down, and sure enough, the wine tasted thick and mellow and there was not a trace of bitterness. In addition, a taste of cool and refreshing was also added to the wine and made it even more delicious. He couldn't help but praise.

"How marvelous! Now I did a great job brewing the wine; Brother Feng did a great job explained it; Second brother did a great job made the ice. Well, what about you? Hmm…." He grinned at Xiang Wentian. "You did a great job stooging alongside."

Mr. Black-White drank up his wine casually, didn't even pay any attention to the flavor of it. Grabbing Xiang Wentian's arm, he pulled.

"Come on! Come on! Show me how Liu Zhongpu's 'Blood-Spitting Manual' looks like."

Xiang Wentian gave Linghu Chong's sleeve a gentle pull, and Linghu Chong immediately understood. "I'd like to go take a look, myself." he said.

"I bet you there's nothing interesting about it. Why don't you and I stay here and enjoy our wine?" Mr. Paint suggested.

"We can watch the game and enjoy our wine at the same time," Linghu Chong replied and began walking following behind Mr. Black-White and Xiang Wentian.

Mr. Paint had no choice but follow them into the game room, holding the big wine barrel under the arm.

The game room was a very spacious room, but other than a stone table and two soft chairs in the middle of the room it was completely empty. The top of the stone table had been carved into a game board with a grid of nineteen vertical and nineteen horizontal lines. On the two ends of the checkerboard sat two baskets, one filled with black game pieces and one with white ones. Apparently having no other articles in the room except the table, the chairs and the game pieces was to minimize distractions for the players.

Xiang Wentian walked to the stone table and then placed one game piece on each of the "star" points on the four corners of the game board. Next, he set a white game piece on the six-three intersection, then a black game piece on the nine-three intersection, a white game piece on the six-five intersection, a black game piece on the nine-five intersection. He went on and on and placed one game piece after another onto the game board, gradually slowing down as he went.

The black side and the white side began a fierce dogfight from the very beginning of the game, and neither side had even one poor move. Mr. Black-White looked at the game board with fixed stares and soon sweat streamed down his forehead.

Linghu Chong found himself baffled by the scene. He had witnessed how Mr. Black-White turned water into ice with his "Profound Heavenly Finger" Kung Fu, which would have required extraordinary inner energy cultivation, but he

didn't even break a sweat; playing Go game was only an unorthodox school,[73] yet he was sweating profusely just watching a game. When one had great concern about something, he would more likely to lose his rational. This man was crazy about the game of Go, and Xiang Wentian most probably had picked this weakness of his intentionally as a breakthrough.

Sure enough, when Mr. Black-White noticed that Xiang Wentian hadn't put any game piece down a long while after he showed the sixty-sixth move, he turned impatient.

"What about the next move?" he asked.

"That is a key step of the game. Where do you think the next game piece should be at?" Xiang Wentian grinned.

Mr. Black-White pondered upon the question for quite a while and finally muttered, "Well, where do I want to put this one? A Tsuke move would be inappropriate; a Dame move would not be right; a Sagari move wouldn't make it through; to make two eyes seems impossible.[74] Well…well…well…."

Holding a white game piece with his index finger and middle finger, he rapped on the stone table with it, but after almost half an hour, he was still unable to decide where on the game board to put this game piece. By then Mr. Paint and Linghu Chong had each drank up seventeen or eighteen cups of wine, already.

"Brother Tong, isn't this the 'Blood-Spitting Manual?' Do you really want my Second Brother to spit up blood because of it? Whatever the next step is, why don't you just tell us what it is straightforward?" noticing that Mr. Black-White's face began turning livid, Mr. Paint proposed.

"Alright! The sixty-seventh move should be right here," Xiang Wentian replied as he placed a game piece at the seven-four intersection.

"Splendid!" Mr. Black-White called out as he smacked his thigh with excitement. "To place the game piece there is a brilliant move, indeed."

"Liu Zhongpu's this move is, of course, a brilliant move. But it's only a clever move from a mortal champion. When compared to the divine move from the

Mount Li Fairy Granny, it is far inferior," Xiang Wentian said with a smile.

"What about the divine move from the Mount Li Fairy Granny?" Mr. Black-White inquired eagerly.

"Second Master might as well give it a try," Xiang Wentian said.

Mr. Black-White pondered upon it deeply but could only conclude that this was destined to be a losing battle, and it would have been impossible to turn the tide. So he shook his head.

"Since it's a divine move, how can any one of us mortals figure it out? Brother Tong, there's no need to sell the climax."

"This move contained wonderful foresight. It really takes an immortal to figure it out," Xiang Wentian grinned again.

Mr. Black-White was an expert in gamesmanship, thus also became very proficient in reading an opponent's minds. Since Xiang Wentian wouldn't just speak out the game manual frankly, which made his heart itchier by the second, he reckoned that Xiang must had something he wanted in return.

"Brother Tong, if you tell me this game manual, I assure you that you won't be disappointed."

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "Is it possible that Brother Xiang knew this Second Master's 'Profound Heavenly Finger' Kung Fu can cure my injuries, that's why he went around in such a big circle for the request?"

"Brother Feng and I have nothing to request of the four Manor Masters. Second Master's words have really put us two down," Xiang Wentian raised his head and said.

"I beg your pardon for my discreet remark." Mr. Black-White bowed deeply. Xiang Wentian and Linghu Chong also bowed in return.

"The two of us came to the Plum Manor because we'd like to make a wager with the four Manor Masters," Xiang Wentian said.

""Make a wager? What kind of wager?" Mr. Black-White and Mr. Paint asked

in unison.

"I want to make a wager that no one in the Plum Manor can beat Brother Feng here in sword arts," Xiang Wentian answered.

At those words, Mr. Black and Mr. Paint both turned to look at Linghu Chong. Mr. Black-White's face looked apathetic and with no sign of approval or disapproval. Mr. Paint, on the other hand, broke into a loud laugh.

"What's the stake then?" Mr. Paint asked.

"If we lose, I'll give this painting to Fourth Master," Xiang Wentian replied as he untied the package on his back and opened it, inside which were two scrolls.

Xiang Wentian opened one of the scrolls and a very antiquated painting appeared in front of everyone's eyes. At the upper right corner of the painting the autograph read, "Traveler in Mount Brook, Painted by Fan Zhongli of the Northern Song."[75] In the painting, a towering mountain shot up to the sky, steep and magnificent, well illustrated with the thick ink style. Even though Linghu Chong had little knowledge about painting, he could still tell that this scenery painting was an excellent piece of art. The awe-inspiring mountain stood tall and upright. Although it was only a picture on the canvas, one still couldn't help but feel the admiration soaring in his heart.

"Holy cow!" Mr. Paint cried out. Fixing his eyes upon the painting, he could no longer look away. After a good while he finally spoke again, "This is the authentic work of Fan Kuan in the Northern Song era. Where…where did you get it?"

Xiang Wentian smiled but did not answer. Slowly, he began rolling the painting into a scroll.

"Wait," Mr. Paint called out.

He reached out and pulled Xiang Wentian's arm, trying to stop Xiang from rolling the painting. But as soon as his hand touched Xiang's arm, a stream of soft yet vigorous inner energy shot out of Xiang's arm and gently pushed his palm away. Xiang Wentian looked as though he had no idea about what had just

happened and slowly rolled the painting back into a scroll. Mr. Paint was amazed. When he had pulled Xiang Wentian's arm just now, he had not really put much strength into the pull, afraid that he might damage the painting. But the inner energy push from Xiang's arm clearly showed very advanced inner energy cultivation. Moreover, apparently Xiang had not used his inner energy to the full extent. He felt his admiration growing inwardly.

"Old Tong, turned out your Kung Fu is so excellent! It's probably on par with mine," he praised.

"Fourth Master must be joking! Aside from the skills in sword arts, the four masters of the Plum Manor are invincible in any other kind of Kung Fu. I, Tong Huajin, am just a nobody. How could I ever be compared to the Fourth Master?" Xiang Wentian replied.

"Why did you say 'aside from the skills in sword arts'? Are you so sure that my swordsmanship is not up to his?" Mr. Paint pulled a long face.

"Two Masters, what do you think of this work of calligraphy?" Xiang Wentian let out a slight smile and then unrolled the other scroll, which turned out to be a piece of Crazy Grass[76] style calligraphy with extremely cursive scripts.

"Oh, oh, oh!" Mr. Paint cried out in surprise. After the three "oh" he suddenly shouted out at the top of his lungs, "Third Brother! Third Brother! The treasure of your life is here!"

The shout was so loud and explosive that even the walls, the windows and the door jolted while dusts on top of the rafters and beams on the ceiling began falling. Additionally, the shout was so sudden that Linghu Chong was completed astounded.

"What's the fuss?" a man asked from a distance.

"If you don't hurry up to take a look, once they put it away, you are gonna regret it for the rest of your life!" Mr. Paint shouted.

"You've found another counterfeit calligraphy work, haven't you?" the man outside replied.

The portiere was raised and a man stepped into the room. This was a short and stout man, the top of his head completely bald without a single hair, which shined profusely under the light as though it had been polished. There was a big brush in his right hand and there were ink marks all over his robe. He walked closer to take a look at the calligraphy work, and suddenly, his eyes became wide open and he began breathing heavily.

"This…this is authentic! It really…really…is the 'Willful Book' by Zhang Xu of the Tang Dynasty. It can't…can't…can't be fake!" he muttered, his voice trembling.

The strokes of the Grass Style writing on the paper appeared unrestrained and extensive, as though a Kung Fu master was performing the martial arts of Qing-Gong, leaping up sometimes and bending low some other times, swift in the movement, yet exquisite in the poise.

Out of each ten characters, Linghu Chong could only recognize one at his best. But the many stamps of seals and postscripts at the bottom of the calligraphy book easily convinced him that this calligraphy artwork was no trivial matter.

"This is my third brother Mr. Bald-Brush," Mr. Paint introduced. "He picked this name because calligraphy is his ultimate passion and thousands of writing brushes had turned bald in his hands from practicing. It is not because he is baldheaded. Please don't confuse one with the other."

"Got it!" Linghu Chong acknowledged with a smile.

Reaching out with his right index finger, the man named Mr. Bald-Brush stared at the "Willful Book" and began writing in the air following the ticks and strokes in the calligraphy work, his mind completely imbedded in his own world. Not only didn't he cast a single glance toward Xiang Wentian or Linghu Chong, apparently he didn't even hear a word from Mr. Paint's introduction.

Suddenly, Linghu Chong felt a shock in his heart. "Brother Xiang must have planned this way beforehand. When I first met him in the roadside pavilion, he was already carrying this package behind his back," he thought to himself. But then he had a second though. "At that time, the package did not necessarily

contain those two scrolls. Maybe, along our journey, in order to get the four Plum Manor Masters to treat my injury, he went outside and bought them, or even stole or snatched them, when I was resting in the inn. Hmm, he most likely stole them. Where can he find such invaluable artwork for sale anywhere?"

He could hear the slight sound made by strong energy force tearing through air when that Mr. Bald-Brush wrote in the air with his finger. The powerful internal strength shown was in par with that of Mr. Black-White. "My internal injury was caused by the Peach Valley's Six Fairies and Great Master No Commandment," he thought. "It seems that the internal strength cultivation of the three Plum Manor Masters is no less than that of the Peach Valley's Six Fairies and Great Master No Commandment. The First Manor Master of the Plum Manor might be even more powerful. Together with Brother Xiang, all five of them working together, they perhaps can heal my injury. I certainly hope it would not cost them great inner energy exhaustion."

Xiang Wentian did not wait for Mr. Bald-Brush to finish. He quickly rolled the "Willful Book" back into a scroll and put it back into the package.

Mr. Bald-Brush stared at Xiang Wentian in great disbelief. After a long while, he finally said, "What do you want in exchange?"

"I don't want to exchange it for anything." Xiang Wentian shook his head.

"How about the twenty-eight moves of Stone-Drum[77] Acupoint-Hitting Brush Kung Fu?" Mr. Bald-Brush proposed.

"No!" Mr. Black-White and Mr. Paint shouted in chorus.

"Yes! Why not? If I could use it in exchange for this genuine Crazy Grass work of Zhang Xu, why should I feel pity for losing my Stone-Drum Acupoint-Hitting Brush Kung Fu?" Mr. Bald-Brush disagreed.

"No!" Xiang Wentian shook his head once again.

"Then why did you show it to me?" Mr. Bald-Brush asked anxiously.

"Well, my mistake then. Third Master, just pretend you have never seen it before," Xiang Wentian answered.

“But I have. How can I just pretend I have never seen it?” Mr. Bald-Brush objected.

“If Third Master really wants to acquire this genuine work of Zhang Xu, it’s not difficult at all. All you have to do is to accept our wager,” Xiang Wentian said.

“What’s the wager?” Mr. Bald-Brush asked hurriedly.

“Third Brother,” Mr. Paint cut in, “this mister here is a little bit out of his mind. He wants to make a wager that no one in our Plum Manor could beat the sword arts of this friend Feng from the Huashan School.”

“What if someone could beat his sword arts? What then?” Mr. Bald-Brush asked.

“If someone in the Plum Manor, regardless of whom, can beat my Brother Feng’s long sword, then I’ll give this genuine ‘Willful Book’ of Zhang Xu away to the Third Master for free, and leave that authentic painting by Fan Kuan, ‘Traveler in Mount Brook’, to Fourth Master as a gift. I’ll also write down the twenty famous Go games played by fairies, ghosts, and immortals that I’ve memorized and give them to the Second Master,” Xiang Wentian explained.

“How about our Big Brother? What are you giving to him?” Mr. Bald-Brush asked.

“I have this music score of the ‘Guang-Ling Song’. Maybe the First Master….”

“Guang-Ling Song?” the three Masters of the Plum Manor cried out all together before Xiang Wentian even finished his sentence.

Linghu Chong also felt a shock. “Wasn’t it Elder Qu who found the ‘Guang-Ling Song’ music score after digging through numerous ancient tombs and composed it into the ‘Smiling Proud Wanderer’ song? Where did Brother Xiang get it?” he couldn’t help but ponder. Then he realized, “Brother Xiang was the Right Counselor of the Demon’s Cult, and Elder Qu was an Elder of the Demon’s Cult. They were probably on friendly terms with each other. And when Elder Qu got hold of this music score, in the great joy, he of course would

tell Brother Xiang about it. If Brother Xiang had wanted to borrow it and make a copy, Elder Qu, for sure, wouldn't have any problem with it." At the thought that the music score was still present while the founder had perished, he couldn't help but sigh inwardly.

"Ever since Ji Kang died, the 'Guang-Ling Song' had been lost forever. Brother Tong, aren't these words of yours a bit deceitful?" Mr. Bald-Brush shook his head in disbelief.

"I have an intimate friend, who is obsessed with zither music. He said that everybody believes that after Ji Kang died, there is no more 'Guang-Ling Song' under the sun. Undoubtedly, this music score had fallen into oblivion after the Western Jin Dynasty, but what about before the Western Jin Dynasty?" Xiang Wentian grinned.

Mr. Bald-Brush and the other two Manor Masters glanced at each other blankly; none could understand what Xiang Wentian's words meant.

"This friend of mine possesses extraordinary mentalities. Furthermore, he is not the kind who shies from committing all kinds of outrages. So he began excavating in famous Pre-Jin Dynasty zither players' tombs. A willful man will have his way. After digging through dozens of ancient tombs, he finally found the music score manuscripts in the tomb of Cai Yi, the famous musician of the Eastern Han Dynasty."

Both Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint let out a slight cry of surprise. Mr. Black-White nodded slowly and exclaimed, "Intelligent and courageous! Extraordinary!"

Xiang Wentian opened his package and then took out a booklet with the words "Guang-Ling Song Music Score" written on the cover. He turned a few pages through it casually. Sure enough, it had music notes recorded in it.

"Brother Feng," Xiang Wentian said after he handed the booklet to Linghu Chong, "if anyone in the Plum Manor beats your sword arts, please give this music score to the First Master of the Plum Manor."

Linghu Chong took the booklet and placed it into his chest pocket. "This

could have been Elder Qu's relic. Since Elder Qu has passed away, what's so difficult if Brother Xiang wanted to pick out the music score, himself?" he thought to himself.

"Brother Feng, here, is well accomplished in the art of wine; his sword skills must be just as excellent. But he is only a young man; it's hardly possible that within our Plum Manor…ha-ha, isn't that a bit ridiculous?" Mr. Paint grinned.

"If it is true that no one within our Plum Manor can overcome young hero Feng, what do we lose?" Mr. Black-White asked.

Although Linghu Chong had the agreement with Xiang Wentian beforehand that he would let Xiang arrange everything, he didn't expect things to turn out this way and felt that Xiang Wentian had gone a bit too far. Weren't they here to ask for a healing treatment? How could they be so arrogant and belittling the hosts so much? Besides, he had lost all his inner strength. How could he be a match for these very capable Masters of the Plum Manor? At that thought, he opened his mouth.

"Brother Tong always likes to make jokes. How dare I, an insignificant junior who lags greatly behind in the understanding of martial arts, deliberate sword arts and exchange moves with the Masters of the Plum Manor?"

"These polite remarks are, of course, necessary; otherwise people would have called you a conceited swordsman," Xiang Wentian said.

Mr. Bald-Brush didn't seem to have heard any of these words, instead, he muttered, ""Three drinks turns Zhang Xu into Sage of Grass; baring his head before nobility he showed no class; wielding his writing brush he pours clouds onto papers in a blast.' Second Brother, Zhang Xu was known as the Sage of Grass, the ultimate master in Grass Style calligraphy. This is how Du Fu wrote about him in the poem 'Eight Drinking Saints Song'. He was also one of the 'Eight Drinking Saints'. Just by looking at the 'Willful Book' you can probably imagine how he waved his writing brush about after drinking to his heart's content. Well, it is so powerful and unstrained like a heavenly steed soaring across the skies. Just Brilliant! Just Brilliant!"

“Yep! If he likes to drink, then he must be an awesome guy, and of course the stuff he writes can’t be bad at all,” Mr. Paint agreed.

“Han Yu[78] also wrote about Zhang Xu in his poem: ‘Joy, anger, shame, or uneasiness; depression, sorrow, happiness, or leisure; hatred or aspiration. Inebriated and tipsy, when discontent is felt in the heart, he let it flow through his writing brush in Grass Style.’ This mister and we are just of the same kind. When discontent is felt in the heart, let it flow in writing the Grass Style, as if with a flick of the sword, happy we become!” Mr. Bald-Brush continued. Raising his finger once again, he began writing in the air. After a few strokes, he said to Xiang Wentian, “Hey, come on, let me take another look.”

Xiang Wentian shook his head. “Once Third Master wins the contest, this calligraphy book would have become yours. There is no need to be impatient.” He grinned.

Mr. Black-White was an export in gamesmanship and always had careful consideration of the overall situation. Before thinking about winning, he was already considering the consequences of a defeat.

“If on one within the Plum Manor could defeat Brother Feng’s sword arts, what kind of stakes would we be losing?” he inquired again.

“We have come to the Plum Manor with no intent for any favor or any item. All Brother Feng wants is to come to the ultimate summit of world martial arts and have the opportunity to exchange the understandings of sword arts with the best martial artists in this world. If, with any luck, we end up winning the contest, we’ll turn around and leave right away without asking for any stake from you,” Xiang Wentian answered.

“I see. This Hero Feng has come for fame. Defeating the ‘Four Playfellows of Jiangnan’ in succession will, indeed, gain him great fame in the Martial World,” Mr. Black-White said.

“Second Master, you’ve thought it wrong,” Xiang Wentian replied as he shook his head. “After today’s sword contest in the Plum Manor, regardless of who the winner is, if even one word about it leaks out, Brother Feng and I will stand

condemned by Heaven, and we are no better than dog's droppings."

"Good, good! I like your frankness," Mr. Paint remarked. "This room here is very spacious. Let me exchange a few moves with Brother Feng right here then. Brother Feng, where is your sword?"

"We are not bold enough to bring weapons to the Plum Manor," Xiang Wentian replied with a smile.

"Bring me two swords," Mr. Paint shouted out.

Someone answered from outside the room and soon Ding Jian and Shi Lingwei returned, each holding a sword with both hands. Walking in front of Mr. Paint, they bowed and presented the swords. Picking up the sword from Ding Jian's hands, Mr. Paint said to Shi Lingwei, "Give that sword to him."

"Yes," Shi Lingwei acknowledged and then walked in front of Linghu Chong, holding the sword high with both hands.

Feeling very embarrassed about this entire matter, Linghu Chong turned his head and glanced at Xiang Wentian.

"The Fourth Master of the Plum Manor has reached the acme in the understanding of sword arts. Brother Feng, even if you could only learn one move or one technique from him, you would still benefit from it the rest of your life," Xiang Wentian affirmed.

Linghu Chong knew that under the current circumstance, this sword contest had become inevitable. Having no other alternatives, he took the sword with both hands, bowing slightly.

"Hold it, Fourth Brother," Mr. Black-White spoke up suddenly. "This Brother Tong here has put up a wager that no one in our Plum Manor can defeat Brother Feng. Ding Jian also knows how to use a sword, and he is also part of the Plum Manor. You don't necessarily have to do it yourself." The more confident Xiang Wentian sounded, the more worried he became. So he decided to let Ding Jian take the challenge first and test the water. He knew that Ding Jian possessed excellent skills in sword arts; besides, Ding was only a servant in the Plum

Manor. Even if Ding lost the fight, there would have been no harm done to the great name of the Plum Manor. And with this test, they would be able to tell how good or bad this Feng Er-Zhong's skills in sword arts actually were.

"Sure, sure! As long as a person from the Plum Manor defeats my Brother Feng's sword arts, it counts as our defeat. It doesn't have to be the four Manor Masters themselves. Brother Ding here has earned the nickname 'Straight Line Lightning Sword' in the Martial World. His sword moves are so fast. Such speed is rarely seen in the world. Brother Feng, it will be good for you if you check out Brother Ding's Straight Line Lightning Sword first." Xiang Wentian did not object.

Mr. Paint tossed his long sword toward Ding Jian. "If you lose, you'll be going to Turpan to transport wine for me as your punishment." He grinned.

Ding Jian caught the long sword with a blow and turned toward Linghu Chong. "Ding Jian here thanks Mister Feng for the chance of the sword match," he said. A short ring echoed as he drew his sword.

Linghu Chong also drew his sword and set the sheath on the stone table.

"Three Masters, Brother Ding, this is a contest of sword arts, so there's no need to compete in the inner strength department," Xiang Wentian spoke up again.

"Of course both sides will know when to stop," Mr. Black-White commented.

"Brother Feng," Xiang Wentian turned to Linghu Chong, "you have to promise to not use any inner strength in the match. We are having a contest of sword arts. The one with fine and intimate moves wins the match and the one with crude and sluggish moves loses it. The inner energy cultivation method of your Huashan School is very well-known in the Martial World. If you use your inner strength to achieve victory, then it counts as our defeat."

Linghu Chong almost laughed at these words. He thought to himself, "Brother Xiang knew very well that I don't have any bit of inner strength. He is using these words to trick them." So he said, "If I use my inner strength, for sure the three Masters, Brother Ding and Brother Shi will laugh their teeth off. I certainly

dare not to use any bit of it."

"We've come to the Plum Manor with complete sincerity. If Brother Feng keep sticking to etiquette and being too modest, that would be disrespectful to the four senior masters. Everyone in the Martial world knows that the 'Divine Art of Violet Twilight' of your Huashan School is far superior to the inner strength cultivation method of our Songshan School. Brother Feng, why don't you stand in these two footprints of mine when you spar with Brother Ding and make sure you don't move your feet?"

After these words, Xiang Wentian took a few steps aside, and two footprints, each almost two inches deep, appeared on two bricks on the floor. It turned out that while he was speaking he had shifted his inner strength to his feet and stamped two footprints on the bricks with shear force.

"Excellent Kung Fu!" Mr. Black-White, Mr. Bald-Brush, and Mr. Paint cheered in chorus.

Seeing how Xiang Wentian had shifted his inner strength to the bottom of his feet as he spoke without turning a hair, and there was not a single broken brick piece in the footprints he created, while the depth of the two footprints were exactly identical and the footprints were so smooth as though someone had carved it out carefully, they could tell that Xiang Wentian's inner strength had reached an incredible level, which was way above the inner strength level of their own. They all thought that Xiang Wentian was just showing off his inner strength. Although such an affected performance appeared shallow, not something a true martial arts master would have done, his amazing inner strength cultivation was still very admirable. None had a clue that Xiang Wentian actually had profound meaning in his action.

Linghu Chong had no problem understanding Xiang Wentian's behavior. Xiang had been propagating that his inner strength cultivation was superior to that of Xiang's. If Xiang's inner strength had been so extraordinary, then his could only have been more formidable, then when the match started, his opponents would not be bold enough to use inner strength against him, fearing of bringing disgrace to oneself. Besides, except for the skills in sword arts, he

was no good in any other Kung Fu skills, and leaping and springing about were certainly not his good qualities. By standing in the two footprints and only use sword arts in the spar, he could easily hide his inadequacy.

When Ding Jian heard Xiang Wentian suggesting Linghu Chong to have the sword fight with him while standing still in the two footprints, he couldn't help but feel greatly annoyed by the obvious contempt. But the profound inner strength Xiang Wentian showed by leaving footprints on bricks also astounded him. "If they are bold enough to challenge our four Masters, they could not have been ordinary. If I can get a draw out of the fight, I would have made a great contribution to the Plum Manor of the Lone Hill," he thought to himself.

He used to be an extremely arrogant swordsman in former years, but later he encountered a very formidable enemy. He was taken prisoner and was put through many torments. Fortunately the "Four Playfellows of Jiangnan" rescued him and set him free. That was when he decided to join the Plum Manor and willingly took on the job of a servant. After so many years, the fierceness and boldness inside him had almost died out entirely.

"Brother Ding, please!" Linghu Chong stepped into the footprints made by Xiang Wentian and said with a smile.

"Please excuse my lack of manners," Ding Jian apologized. He brandished his long sword transversely and suddenly, a long, white flash shot across everyone's eyes like a lightning, accompanied by the slight sound of the blade cutting through the air.

Although he had been living in seclusion in the Plum Manor for over ten years, his Kung Fu skills had not declined a bit. The sword art he used was named the "Straight Line Lightning Sword Art," and every time when a move in the sword art form was executed, it looked as though a lightning had just shot across the sky. The dazzling effect was so dramatic that it would have easily stunned the opponent and put fear in his heart. The formidable enemy that had once defeated him was a blind loner robber. Because the man was completely blind and used his hearing to detect Ding Jian's sword moves, the awe-inspiring atmosphere created by the "Straight Line Lightning Sword" had no effect on

him. At this moment when he put the sword art to good use, suddenly, the entire room had been filled with dazzling lightning flares.

But only after the first move of the “Straight Line Lightning Sword” was put to display, Linghu Chong had identified three major flaws in the sword art. Ding Jian didn’t rush with his attack and simply waved his sword about as though he was showing a good amount of manners to a guest of the manor when in truth, he really intended to dazzle and slacken Linghu Chong so he would not be able to withstand the sharp attacking moves following behind.

By the time Ding Jian was on his fifth move, Linghu Chong had already counted a total of eighteen flaws in his sword moves. “Excuse me,” he said as he thrust his long sword out at an oblique angle.

At the moment Ding Jian was in the middle of sweeping his sword from the left to the right in a rapid swing. Although the blade of Linghu Chong’s sword was still two feet and six inches from his wrist, but the swing would have sent his own wrist toward the naked blade, and since the sweep was too rapid and carried too much strength, it was already impossible to take it back.

“Look out!” the five bystanders called out in unison as if by prior agreement.

Mr. Black-White happened to be holding two game pieces, one black and one white, in his palm. Just when he was about to shoot them at Linghu Chong’s long sword to save Ding Jian’s hand from being cutting off, a thought popped into his head, “If I help Ding Jian out by interfering with the contest, that would make the fight two against one, then clearly the Plum Manor would have lost the match and there would be no need for any further contest.” Amid his hesitancy, Dian Jian’s wrist had swept toward the sword blade speedily while Shi Lingwei uttered a loud cry of panic.

At the faction of the second, Linghu Chong turned his wrist gently, turning the blade of the sword sideways. With a light clap, Ding Jian’s wrist hit the flat side of the sword, and to all the audiences’ pleasant surprise, his wrist didn’t suffer even the slightest damage. Only after a short daze did Ding Jian realize that his opponent had really shown great leniency. Within that fraction of a second, he

had been fortunate enough to keep his hand. If his wrist had been cut, all his Kung Fu skills would have been ruined. Covered with cold sweat, he bowed down deeply.

"I am utterly grateful for the mercy Hero Feng has shown with his sword."

"I don't really deserve it!" Linghu Chong also bowed back.

Witnessing how Linghu Chong had turned his long sword to spare Ding Jian from bloodshed, Mr. Black-White, Mr. Bald-Brush, and Mr. Paint all felt their favor toward Linghu Chong growing rapidly. Mr. Paint poured a cup with wine and then raised it with both hands.

"Brother Feng, your sword skills are marvelous. Here's a toast for you!" he said.

"You flatter me!" Linghu Chong replied. Taking the wine cup from Mr. Paint, he drank it up.

Mr. Paint also drank a cup of wine in accompany. Filling the wine cup in Linghu Chong's hands again, he said, "Brother Feng, you are a man with great mercy and spared Ding Jian's hand. That calls for another toast."

"It was just a coincident. There's nothing to it," Linghu Chong answered and drank up his wine, holding the cup with both hands.

After drinking a cup in accompany, Mr. Paint filled the cup once again.

"Let's hold on to the third cup here, shall we? Let's have our play first, and whoever loses the match will have to drink the third cup as his penalty," he said.

"I'll be losing the match naturally. Why don't I drink it first?" Linghu Chong showed a big grin.

"No hurry! No hurry!" Mr. Paint shook his hand in disapproval. Setting the wine cup onto the stone table, he grabbed the long sword from Ding Jian's hands. "Brother Feng, you go first."

At the time of the first two cups of wine, Linghu Chong had already been deliberating inwardly, "He claims that he is addicted to, firstly, the art of wine,

secondly, the art of painting, and thirdly, the art of sword, then his skills in the sword art had to be very exceptional. Judging from that celestial beings painting of his at the reception hall, the strokes are no doubt swift and fierce, however, it seems that he had some problem discipline himself. If his sword moves are comparable to his painting techniques, then they must have many flaws." Bowing down respectfully, he said, "Fourth Master, I beg for your clemency."

"Don't be too modest. Go ahead, show your moves," Mr. Paint said.

"Yes!" Linghu Chong answered.

Raising his long sword, he thrust it at Mr. Paint's shoulder. The thrust was both skewed and tremulous. It obviously carried no strength, nor did it follow any methodical sword art principles. There simply could not have had a sword move like this amongst all possible sword arts in the entire world.

"What the hack is this?" Mr. Paint cried out, astounded.

Since he knew that Linghu Chong was a member of the Huashan Sword School, he had been pondering over the many sword art forms of the Huashan School in his mind. Who would have thought that when the first move was shown, it was nothing like it? Not only wasn't it a move from the Huashan Style Sword Arts, it couldn't even be called a sword move.

Ever since Linghu Chong studied the art of sword from Feng Qingyang, he not only learned the world-prominent "Dugu Nine Swords," but also grasped "overcoming a move without a move" the ultimate gist in the art of sword. This gist and the theory behind the "Dugu Nine Swords" supplement each other. Though the profoundness and subtlety of the "Dugu Nine Swords" had reached the extreme as a sword art form, it contained moves and techniques after all, which were still traceable. But once one applied the principle of "overcoming a move without a move" to it, it became even more volatile and unpredictable, leaving no mark for the opponent to fathom. Therefore, when Linghu Chong made the thrust, Mr. Paint was immediately stunned, not knowing what would be the right way to block it using his own sword. Very confused, he took two paces back to dodge it.

When Linghu Chong made Ding Jian threw down his sword and gave in with only one move, although Mr. Black-White and Mr. Bald-Brush both praised Linghu Chong's sword skills inwardly, neither of them found the result surprising, thinking that if he was bold enough to challenge the Plum Manor, it would have been ridiculous if he couldn't even defeat a servant of the Plum Manor. After seeing how Mr. Paint was forced to retreat two steps by his first thrust, they found themselves astounded.

After retreating two paces back, Mr. Paint charged two paces forward right away. Linghu Chong sent another thrust out with his long sword, this time aiming at the upper left side of Mr. Paint's body. This thrust was, again, just a random thrust that did not follow any of the general sword art principles. Mr. Paint wanted to fend it off with a side swing of his sword, but before the two swords even collided, he immediately realized that the opponent's sword tip had shifted into a slanting angle pointing toward the lower right costal region, which was wide open, and if the opponent took advantage of this weakness in defense, the situation would be beyond redemption. That meant the block would be very unwise. In desperation, he changed his move instantly. With a quick push to the ground, he sprang backward over ten feet.

"Excellent sword skills!" he shouted out and charged forward once again without any delay. Putting his entire weight behind the sword, he drove the blade toward Linghu Chong in great speed. This was a thrust with overwhelming power.

Noticing an obvious flaw at Mr. Paint's bending right arm, Linghu Chong swung the long sword in no time and chopped toward his right elbow. If Mr. Paint did not change his move midway, then his right elbow would be cut off before he could incur any damage to his opponent. But Mr. Paint was a true swordsman with great skills. In the great hurry, he quickly lowered his wrist and thrust his sword at the floor. Relying on the counterforce from the floor, he flipped backward and landed steadily in over twenty feet. At the time his back was only a few inches from the wall. If he had used a little bit more strength when he executed the back flip, his back would have collided with the wall,

which would have undoubtedly put a big dent on his reputation as a Martial Arts Grandmaster. But even so, the escape was simply too awkward, and his face showed some slight purplish red from the rush.

Being an open-minded and generous person, Mr. Paint laughed out, instead. Raising his left thumb, he uttered, "Excellent sword skills!" Waving his long sword vigorously, he launched a move "White Aurora Shooting the Sun," which was then changed to "Willow Wickers Fluttering in the Spring Breeze," which in turn changed to the "Mounting Flood-Dragon and the Soaring Phoenix." The three moves were completed without any letup. It looked as though he didn't ever move his feet, but once the three moves were executed, the tip of his long sword had reached Linghu Chong's face.

Linghu Chong tilted his sword and smacked down gently, the flat side of his sword pushing down against the middle ridge of Mr. Paint's long sword. The gentle smack was executed with such accuracy in its positioning and timing. At that exact moment when Mr. Paint thrust his sword forward, his strength and energy were all concentrating on the tip of the sword, and the middle ridge of the sword carried no strength at all. As a light clank echoed, the long sword in his hand sank helplessly. Linghu Chong snapped his wrist gently and sent his long sword forward, pointing directly at Mr. Paint's solar plexus.

"Ah!" Mr. Paint cried out and leapt to the left. Folding his left hand into a sword finger form, he charged forward, waving the long sword in his right hand fiercely. This time he resorted to forceful hacks and chops, bringing his sword swishing down through the air. "Watch out!" he shouted.

He didn't really want to injure Linghu Chong. But this strike named "Jade Dragon Hanging Upside Down" was extremely swift and fierce. If the opponent had overlooked it and he couldn't rein in his own force in time, he was afraid that the strike might actually wound the opponent.

"Got it!" Linghu Chong acknowledged as he poked his long sword upward. With a slight rustle, the edge of his sword sliced upward right next to the side of Mr. Paint's sword.

If Mr. Paint followed through with the sword strike, before his blade could reach Linghu Chong's head, his five fingers holding his long sword would have been sliced off first. As he watched his opponent's long sword sliding upward against his own blade, a move that could not be countered, having no other alternative, he struck down heavily with his left palm. The energy shot out from his palm hit the floor with a loud boom, and utilizing the counterforce, he leapt backward and landed over ten feet away.

Before he even recomposed to a firm stance, he had drew three circles in front of him with his long sword, which magically changed into three circles of light. The three circles of light looked as though they'd actually materialized. After freezing in the air for a moment, they began moving toward Linghu Chong gradually. At the first look, these sword energy turned circles of light did not appear as swift or fierce as the "Straight Line Lightning Sword," but the energy released easily filled the entire room and everyone felt the chilling force coming from them.

Linghu Chong extended his long sword and then sliced out from the left side of the light circle with an inclined angle, which was exactly an energy gap when the power from Mr. Paint's first move was just about to die and the power from the second move was just about to be released.

"Oh?" Mr. Paint uttered and retreated. The light circles made from the sword energy also retreated together with him. But all of a sudden, the light circles shrank briefly before growing into enormous shapes rapidly and gushing speedily toward Linghu Chong.

Linghu Chong shook his wrist and thrust out his long sword; once again, with another cry of surprise, Mr. Paint leapt away in a hurry.

Thus with numerous quick charging forwards and quick retreats, within moments, Mr. Paint had attacked with eleven moves and retreated eleven times. By then, the reflections from his sword had grown severely from the accelerated attacks and painted a layer of blue on his face. His beard and mustache also looked as though they were all standing on their ends from the tense atmosphere. Amid a loud roar from Mr. Paint, dozens of light circles, some big

and some small, shot toward Linghu Chong at the same time. This was the very peak of perfection in his sword art, with which he had combined dozens of sword moves into one. Every single one out of the dozens of sword moves contained fierce killer techniques, and each move had several variations. Once combined, the complexity was simply unrivaled.

Resisting complexity with simplicity, Linghu Chong squatted slightly and prodded his sword tip up from under the dozens of light circles, pointing directly at Mr. Paint's lower stomach. With another loud cry, Mr. Paint leapt backward with all his strength. "Bang!" he sat heavily on the stone table from the fall. Next, several clatters echoed as the wine cups on the stone table fell to the floor from the sudden shake and smashed to pieces.

"Marvelous! Marvelous!" Mr. Paint broke into a loud laughter. "Brother Feng, your skills in the art of sword are much, much better than mine. Come, come, come! I propose three toasts for you!"

Mr. Black-White and Mr. Bald-Brush knew very well about their fourth brother's attainments in the art of sword. But without ever stepping out of the footprints made by Xiang Wentian, Linghu Chong successfully forced Mr. Paint back eighteen times during his sixteen attacking moves. The incredible sword skills Linghu Chong had shown were both admirable and frightening. Mr. Paint filled the wine cups and drank three cups together with Linghu Chong.

"Among the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan, my Kung Fu is the weakest. Although I admit my defeat, Second Brother and Third Brother won't admit theirs. Probably they'll want to check you out themselves," he said.

"We did exchange many moves, but Fourth Master didn't lose in any one of them, how can we conclude the match with a winner?" Linghu Chong disagreed.

"I lost after the first move. The rest seventeen moves were all unnecessary. Big Brother says that I need to improve my demeanor. He is absolutely right." Mr. Paint shook his head.

"Fourth Master's demeanor is in very high standard, just like your tolerance of

wine is also in very high standard," Linghu Chong said with a smile.

"Yeah! Yeah! Let's drink some more!" Mr. Paint grinned.

Being a man who thought highly of himself in the art of sword, Mr. Paint didn't have a single trace of irritation after losing to a not well-known at all junior swordsman. The negligent and open-minded grace he had shown was undoubtedly first-class. Both Xiang Wentian and Linghu Chong felt great admiration for him.

"Shi, will you please go and get me my bald brush?" Mr. Bald-Brush said to Shi Lingwei.

Shi Lingwei answered and went out. Soon, he returned with a weapon and then presented the weapon to Mr. Bald-Brush with both hands respectfully.

Linghu Chong took at look at it, which turned out to be a Judge's Pen, one foot and six inches in length, cast in fine steel. The funny thing was that there was actually a bundle of wool, still with ink, tied to the end of the Judge's Pen, as though it was a real brush used for writing. For ordinary Judge's Pens, the head section was used to seal the enemy's Acupoints. But this pen here used the soft lamb wool as the pen's head. When it was used to strike people's Acupoints, how could it help in defeating the enemy in a real battle? Linghu Chong figured that Mr. Bald-Brush must know some special kind of Kung Fu; besides, he must possess very resourceful inner strength, so as soon as the inner energy is released, even lamb wool could be used to wound the enemy.

"Brother Feng, are you still going to stay in those two footprints?" taking the Judge's Pen into his hand, Mr. Bald-Brush asked with a grin.

Linghu Chong took two steps back at once. "I dare not! I am a junior asking pointers from a Senior Master, how dare I be overconfident?" He bowed.

"There you go!" Mr. Paint nodded. "When you had the sword contest with me, it was okay for you to stay put. But to fight my Third Brother, that wouldn't be wise."

Mr. Bald-Brush raised the Judge's Pen and smiled. "My stroke forms are all

created from variations of famous calligraphy artists' masterpieces. Brother Feng is a man well versed in both polite letters and martial arts. I am sure you can easily recognize the way of my Judge's Pen moves. Brother Feng is a good friend, therefore, I won't dip this bald brush in ink."

Linghu Chong was slightly taken aback, thinking to himself, "If he didn't consider me a good friend, then he would have dipped his brush in ink. What's going to happen if he does dip his brush in ink?"

He was unaware that the ink Mr. Bald-Brush dipped his brush in during real combats was actually made from stewing very special medicinal materials, and after the ink got on one's skin, the color would imprint deeply under the skin and could never be removed, whether by washing or scraping with a knife. In the former years when Martial masters had fought the "Four Playfellows of Jiangnan," Mr. Bald-Brush had been the one giving them the most headaches. If anyone had not been extra careful, he would end up with a circle, a cross, or even a word or two written on his face by the Mr. Bald-Brush, and then the rest of his life would have been completed ruined. People would rather take a hack or even lose an arm than having him drawing things on the face. Only because Mr. Bald-Brush saw how Linghu Chong showed great leniency in his match against Ding Jian and Mr. Paint, had he decided to not dip his brush in ink.

Even though Linghu Chong had no idea what Mr. Bald-Brush had meant, he figured that it must have been some kind of good intention. So he bowed.

"Many thanks for the great kindness. Unfortunately I am not very literate; I am sure I won't be able to recognize Third Master's brush strokes."

Mr. Bald-Brush was slightly disappointed. "You don't know calligraphy?" he said. "Okay, let me explain it to you first. The stroke form I am about to use is called 'General Pei Poem,'[79] which transformed from Yan Zhenqing's[80] calligraphy book. There are a total of twenty-three characters, and each character contains between three and sixteen moves. Now listen carefully: 'General Pei! The great lord that ruled the Six Directions![81] The valiant general that guarded peace in the Nine Fields![82] His war-horse as valorous as the dragon or tiger,

galloping above the high mound with grand and heroic spirit!’”

“Thanks for the guidance,” Linghu Chong replied, but inwardly, he thought, “You can explain about the poem or the calligraphy all you want. I know nothing about them anyhow.”

Mr. Bald-Brush swung the big pen and pecked three times toward Linghu Chong’s left cheek. These were none other than the first three strokes of the character “Pei.” These three pecks were actually fake moves. Raising his big pen high in the air, he was just about delineate down from the top, when Linghu Chong suddenly thrust his long sword out in a preemptive strike and stabbed toward his right shoulder. Mr. Bald-Brush was forced into holding his big pen crosswise to block the strike, but by then Linghu Chong had already retracted his sword. Their two weapons did not collide with each other; both moves turned out to be fakes. But Mr. Bald-Brush was only able to execute half of the first move of the “General Pei” form and couldn’t complete it.

After blocking only to thin air, Mr. Bald-Brush immediately launched the second move. Before the head of the pen had a chance to strike forward, Linghu Chong had already thrust at another spot where he had no alternative but to defend. Without delay, Mr. Bald-Brush swung his pen backward to fend it off, but Linghu Chong had retracted his long sword once again, and Mr. Bald-Brush’s second wave terminated again only half way through.

Right from the beginning, Mr. Bald-Brush’s two moves were both interrupted midway through. Not able to complete the pen form he was very proud of, Mr. Bald-Brush couldn’t help but feel quite annoyed, as though a calligrapher had just picked up his brush to write, but only a few strokes into it, a naughty kid began catching his penholder or pulling his arms, and prevented him from finishing writing a character smoothly.

“I have already read the entire poem of ‘General Pei Poem’ to him beforehand. He knows the order of my strokes and is able to predict my moves and stop me ahead of time. I’d better not follow the order of the characters with my later moves,” Mr. Bald-Brush thought inwardly. After a fake dot, the big pen curved downward from the upper right corner to the lower left corner with abundant

strength, writing the character “As” in the Grass Style. But Linghu Chong quickly pushed his long sword forward and pointed at his right rib cage. Astounded, Mr. Bald-Brush reversed the movement of the Judge’s Pen and smash it toward Linghu Chong’s long sword. Who would have expected that this stab of Linghu Chong’s was not a real stab? All he really did was just showing the posture, but once again, Mr. Bald-Brush was only able to execute half of his move. With this Grass Style stroke, he had put out a great amount of energy and strength. When suddenly the movement was redirected, not only did the stroke become stagnant, his internal strength was also forced to reroute, which stirred up quite some energy disruption inside his lower stomach and caused indescribable discomfort.

After taking a deep breath, he waved his Judge’s Pen rapidly in an attempt to finish the “Galloping” move, but only half way into it, he was forced to retract his Judge’s Pen in defense by Linghu Chong’s attack just as usual.

Mr. Bald-Brush was greatly irritated. “Hey chap! Stop putting sand in the wheels!” he bellowed as he accelerated his Judge’s Pen’s movement. But no matter how he sprang left and right transforming his moves, he was only able to write up to the second stroke with each character before being forced to stop by Linghu Chong’s sword strikes.

Mr. Bald Brush uttered a loud roar, and suddenly the writing style changed completely. Before, the flow of the strokes was free and unrestrained; now the strokes turned thick and heavy, with the vigor passing through the center while the cutting edge appeared blustering and aggressive. The strokes looked straightforward yet grand at the same time.

Linghu Chong of course had no way of knowing that this stroke form was inspired by the calligraphy book “Mount Bameng Maxim” written by the famous Shu General Zhang Fei,[83] but he also noticed the dramatic change in the writing style. He couldn’t care for less as to what move his opponent was using, and every time as soon as he saw the Judge’s Pen move, he would attack its flaw.

Mr. Bald-Brush croaked in frustration, but regardless of his movements, he was only able to execute half of his move and never succeeded in completing

the full move.

Suddenly, Mr. Bald-Brush's writing style changed again and began writing the Grass Style in "Huai Su Self-Stating Book"[84] Now the strokes flutters in all directions and the flow of the writing became much unpredictable.

"Huai Su's Grass Style calligraphy, by itself, was already very difficult to read. Now I am adding even more Grass Scripts to the Grass Style, I bet this chap won't be able to recognize this self-made Grass Scripts of mine," he thought to himself.

How could he have known that Linghu Chong couldn't even read many characters written in the square-shaped regular scripts, not mentioning the unrestrained Grass Scripts? He had assumed that the only reason Linghu Chong succeeded in predicting his movement and stopping him ahead of time was because Linghu Chong had been able to read his writing, when in fact all Linghu Chong saw in his eyes were weapon moves and forms, and his successful striking to the cracks all attributed to attacking the flaws in the opponent's moves.

Even with the Crazy Grass Style, Mr. Bald-Brush still could only go as far as half a move with each of his moves. Feeling the indignation growing rapidly inside his chest, he suddenly shouted out loudly.

"No more fight! No more fight!"

Leaping backward, he picked up that barrel of grape wine Mr. Paint had brought along and poured the wine onto the stone table. Dipping his big pen in the wine, he began writing on the white wall, and it was none other that "General Pei Poem." All twenty-three characters appeared full of passion, especially the character "As," which looked as though it could have flown off the wall any minute.

After finishing off the writing, Mr. Bald-Brush finally let out a breath of relief. Turning his head sideways slightly, he admired the large characters on the white wall in dark red color, and laughed out loudly.

"Wonderful! Among my life-long artworks, this one is the finest," he

concluded.

The more he looked at it, the prouder he became.

“Second Brother, can I take this game room from you? I’d hate to part with this calligraphy work. I am afraid that I’ll never be able to write anything as good in the rest of my life,” he requested.

“Fine,” Mr. Black-White answered. “Other that the stone table, there’s nothing else in this room anyway. Even if you don’t want it, I’d have to move all the same. How can I ever focus on the game of go while facing the vigorous calligraphy of yours everyday?”

Mr. Bald-Brush stared at the several lines of calligraphy and wagged his head back and forth, feeling very pleased of himself.

“Even if the revered Mr. Yan was reborn, I am afraid he wouldn’t be able to write something like this,” he praised himself. Turning his head toward Linghu Chong, he said, “Hey buddy! It all thanks to you for keeping my ardors inside my belly until it was filled to the point of bursting, and then all of a sudden, they poured out from my heart through my hand and enabled me to create such splendid and unparalleled work under heaven. Your sword skills are excellent, and my calligraphy skills are also excellent. This is called each has his specialty and no winner can be claimed in this match.”

“Exactly! Each has his specialty and no winner can be claimed in this match,” Xiang Wentian agreed.

“Moreover, it was also because of my excellent wine!” Mr. Paint added.

“This Third Brother of mine is as innocent and artless as a child. Please note that he is simply crazy about calligraphy; it’s not that he does not admit he had lost the match.” Mr. Black-White explained.

“I understand,” Xiang Wentian answered. “The wager is that no one in the Plum Manor can beat Brother Feng’s sword art anyway, so as long as no winner can be claimed, we don’t lose our wager.”

“That’s correct!” Mr. Black-White nodded.

Reaching under the stone table, Mr. Black-White drew a square-shaped iron board from underneath. The iron board had nineteen horizontal lines and nineteen vertical lines engraved onto it. Turned out this was a game board cast in iron. Holding a corner of the iron game board, he said, "Brother Feng, let me using this game board as my weapon to check out your brilliant moves."

"I've heard that Second Master's game board is a magical treasure item that can control many kinds of weapons and projectiles," Xiang Wentian said.

Mr. Black-White cast a long glance at him and then replied, "Brother Tong certainly has wide learning and a retentive memory. Very admirable! Very admirable! In fact, this weapon of mine is no magical item. It was made from magnets, so it would be able to attract game pieces made of iron, this way when I played games with other people while boarding boats or on horsebacks in former years, the game pieces would stay and allow us to continue with the game."

"I see," Xiang Wentian answered.

Hearing these words, Linghu Chong thought to himself, "Luckily Brother Xiang gave me the pointer ahead of time, otherwise, my long sword would have been attracted to his game board right from the start, and I'd have lost the match without the real fight. When I spar with this person, I have to make sure that I don't let his game board touch my long sword." At that thought, he pointed his long sword to the floor and then cupped his hands in salute.

"Second Master, thanks for giving me the opportunity to ask advice from you."

"I dare not. Brother Feng's understanding in the art of sword is brilliant. I have never seen extraordinary sword skills in my life. Please start!" Mr. Black-White said.

With a random slice Linghu Chong let his long sword wiggled in the air following an squiggly line.

"What kind of sword move is this?" Mr. Black-White hesitated for a fraction of a second. Seeing that the tip of the sword quickly approaching his own

throat, he swung his game board and blocked. But Linghu Chong had redirected the stab and thrust his long sword toward his right shoulder. Without much thinking, Mr. Black-White moved the game board and blocked again. Before the long sword even approached the game board, Linghu Chong had retracted it and thrust it at Mr. Black-White's lower stomach instead, which Mr. Black-White blocked once again.

"If I don't counter attack, how do I take over the initiative?" Mr. Black-White thought inwardly.

In the game of go, it is very important to control the initiative of the game; in a martial arts competition, it is also critical to control the initiative. As an expert in the gamesmanship, Mr. Black-White of course was very familiar with this idea, so not wasting another moment, he raised his game board and pounded it toward Linghu Chong's right shoulder. The game board was about two feet wide and one inch thick. It was a very heavy piece of weapon. If it smashed into the long sword, even if the iron board didn't have magnetism, the long sword would still have been broken.

Turning his body slightly toward the side, Linghu Chong drove the sword toward the Mr. Black-White's lower rib cage. In Mr. Black-White's eyes, this thrust didn't look like a legitimate move at all, but the spot it was attacking certainly required attention. So he swung the game board in a tilted angle to knock toward the long sword and at the same time pushed the game board forward. This move "Big Hosi"[85] was one that contained counterattacking in the defending. If Linghu Chong had to respond to this move, then his following moves would pour out in a steady stream. Who would have thought that Linghu Chong paid no attention to his move? Jabbing his long sword with an angle, Linghu Chong had launched a forestalled attack. Thus, Mr. Black-White's defending move containing counterattacking function only had half the effect: the defending part worked but the counterattacking didn't.

Afterwards, one thrust after another, Linghu Chong attacked over forty times without any delay. Mr. Black-White blocked left and warded right and defended his front and protected his back, putting up a defense shield so tight as though if

one splashed water toward the shield, not even a drop of water would make it through, a very firm shield indeed. But they exchanged over forty moves, and Mr. Black-White's over forty moves were all defending moves. He didn't even have a spare second to launch one counterattacking move.

Mr. Bald-Brush, Mr. Paint, Ding Jian, and Shi Lingwei were completed stupefied. They could all see with their own eyes that Linghu Chong's moves were neither quick, nor overwhelming, nor fierce, and the transformation between moves didn't seem tricky or crafty, but every time when he thrust his long sword out, it would always put Mr. Black-White into straitened circumstances and make him work to make up for his flaws. Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint both understood it very well that there is flaw in every single martial arts move. But if one could forestall and attack the opponent's vital points first, then his own flaws would not have become flaws, and even if he had hundreds or even thousands of flaws, it would not have mattered. And the forty or so continuing attacking moves Linghu Chong showed simply followed this principle.

Mr. Black-White also felt the shock growing bigger and bigger in his heart. He really wanted to launch his own counterattack, but as soon as he moved the game board slightly, the sword tip of the opponent was already pointing toward the flaws in his own moves. Within the forty moves also, he simply had no chance to improve the situation, as though he was playing a game of go with someone who had much, much higher skills, and for every single one of the forty or so game pieces the opponent played, he had no choice but to respond. Mr. Black-White knew that if the fight had continued like this, then even after another one hundred or two hundred moves, he would still be in the same boat where he would keep taking hits and never be able to fight back.

"If I don't take on some risks for a chance of success, then my illustrious name would have been completely ruined," he thought to himself. Swinging his game board forward horizontally, he smashed it toward Linghu Chong's left side waist in high speed. Once again, without dodge for the strike, Linghu Chong thrust his long sword toward Mr. Black-White's lower stomach, but this time,

Mr. Black-White didn't retrieve his game board to defend and still smashed the game board forward as though he was ready to risk his life and have a common ruin with his opponent. At the time when the sword tip approached his stomach, he suddenly reached out with his left hand and clipped at the sword blade with his index finger and middle finger. He had mastered the "Profound Heavenly Finger" Kung Fu, and the two fingers carried immense inner strength, which was really no less than another powerful weapon.

Seeing Mr. Black-White using such a risky move, the five bystanders all cried out in shock. Such move would no longer qualify as a contest of skills, but rather a game of life and death. If he failed to catch the sword with his fingers, then the sword tip would undoubtedly end up penetrating his stomach. Within the fraction of an instant, all five of them felt cold sweat in their palms. Mr. Black-White's two fingers were almost touching the sharp blade of the sword, and whether he could catch the blade or not, one out of the two sparring pair would for sure get wounded or get killed. If he did catch the blade, then Linghu Chong's long sword could not go any further, the game board would strike him in the waist, and he would not have any time to evade it. If he failed to catch the blade, or if he did catch the blade but failed to stop the long sword from going forward, then the long sword would continue with the thrust and even if Mr. Black-White wanted to leap back, he would have no time to do so.

Just at the instant when Mr. Black-White's finger barely touched the blade of the sword, the tip of the sword suddenly went upward and pointed at his throat. This change simply exceeded everybody's wildest imagination. Throughout all the martial arts in the history, there couldn't have ever had a move like this, because this would have meant that the first thrust toward the lower stomach was actually a fake. Using such a fake move in a fight between two top-notch martial artists would have been a joke. But even though this move did not comply with any orthodox principle in the art of sword, it did come out through Linghu Chong's hand. The sword tip prodded upward toward Mr. Black-White's throat. If Mr. Black-White's game board continued with the strike forward, the prod would have penetrated his throat first.

Utterly dumbstruck, Mr. Black-White used all his strength and held the game board still. He was a man with very quick wits and a master in gamesmanship, at the moment of the imminent peril, he immediately figured out the opponent's intention: if he aborted his strike with the game board, then the opponent's long sword would not prod forward either.

Sure enough, seeing that he held the game board still, Linghu Chong also froze the thrust with the long sword. The tip of the sword was only inches from his throat while his game board was also only inches from Linghu Chong's waist. Both of them held their positions steady and froze like two lifeless statues.

Although it looked as if neither was willing to budge, Linghu Chong was really the one with all the advantages. The game board was a heavy item; only when it was striking down from several feet afar would it incur any damage. At present, it was only inches from Linghu Chong, even if Mr. Black-White decided to push it forward with lots of power, it wouldn't do Linghu Chong much harm, but all Linghu Chong had to do was to prod forward gently, and the sword tip would easily kill his opponent. It was pretty obvious for everyone to tell who was in better shoes.

"Well, neither dares to move first. That's called 'Dual Life' in the rule of go. Second Master is really both intelligent and courageous. You have ended up a draw in the match against Brother Feng," Xiang Wentian declared with a grin.

Linghu Chong withdrew his long sword and took two steps back. "Please excuse my boldness." He bowed.

"Brother Tong must be joking. How can one call this a draw? Brother Feng's understanding in the art of sword is incomparable. I just had a crushing defeat," Mr. Black-White muttered.

"Second Brother, your Kung Fu with your game piece darts is a unique skill in the Martial World. Nobody could ever escape it when you shoot out the three hundred and sixty-one black and white game pieces. Why don't you check out this Brother Feng's Kung Fu in breaking darts?" Mr. Paint suggested.

Mr. Black-White felt a throb in his heart. He glanced at Xiang Wentian, who

nodded slightly a few times. Turning his head to look at Linghu Chong, he found no expression on Linghu Chong's face.

"This one's sword skills are to the extreme," he thought secretly, "in the entire world, that person probably is the only one who could defeat him. The look on those two's faces suggested that they had great confidence. If I have another contest of darts, most probably I'll end up making myself a fool one more time."

At that thought, he shook his head and showed a wry smile, "I have already admitted my defeat. What's the need for another match of darts?"

Chapter 20: Imprisonment

Translated by Lanny Lin



Linghu Chong picked up the bamboo flute and waved gently. Air flew through the holes on the flute and made several soft tones. Mr. Huang-Zhong plunked the strings a couple of times with his right hand, in the echoing, the end of the zither was already on it's way towards Linghu Chong's right shoulder.

“Brother Tong, will you please let me take another look at your calligraphy book?” still concerned about the “Willful Book” by Zhang Xu, Mr. Bald-Brush begged.

“As soon as First Master defeats my Brother Feng, the book will be part of Third Master’s private collection. Even if you want to look at it for three days

and three nights in succession, that's your own call," Xiang Wentian said with a grin.

"I'll look at it for seven days and seven nights in succession!" Mr. Bald-Brush exclaimed.

"Okay, you'll look at it for seven days and seven nights then," Xiang Wentian replied.

Mr. Bald-Brush felt his heart itching with that possibility. "Second Brother," he called out, "I'll go ask Big Brother to have the match. What do you think?"

"You two stay here to accompany our guests. I'll go talk to Big Brother," Mr. Black-White arranged and then stepped out of the room.

"Brother Feng, let's drink," Mr. Paint suggested. "Alas, much of this barrel of wine was wasted by Third Brother." He poured the wine into the wine cups.

"Wasted?" Mr. Bald-Brush rebuffed angrily. "When you drink the wine into your belly, it will only turn into urine and get relieved. How can that even be comparable to the fact that it will now stay on the white wall as calligraphy artwork and last for the eternity? Your wine will only live on because of the calligraphy. One thousand years later, only when people have seen my calligraphy art would they be able to know that this barrel of Turpan red wine ever existed."

Facing the white wall, Mr. Paint raised his cup. "Hello wall, you are so fortunate to be able to taste the wonderful wine brewed by your Fourth Master, himself. Even if my Third Brother didn't write calligraphy on your face, you… you…you would have lasted for the eternity."

"Compared to this ignorant wall, I am much more fortunate to be able to taste such wonderful rare-even-in-one-thousand-year wine," Linghu Chong showed a big smile. Raising his own cup, he drank it up.

After drinking two cups in accompany by the side, Xiang Wentian stopped drinking, but Mr. Paint and Linghu Chong kept pouring wine down their throats and found their exhilaration surging.

After they each had at least another seventeen or eighteen cups, Mr. Black-White finally returned.

“Brother Feng, my Big Brother would like to meet you. Please come with me. And is it okay if Brother Tong stays here and enjoy some more wine?” he said.

“Well…,” Xiang Wentian was taken by surprise. He could see clearly that Mr. Black-White had no intention of inviting him to tag along, and he couldn’t insist on going after all. “What a pity for life that it’s not my karma to have the honor in meeting First Master,” he sighed.

“Please pardon me, Brother Tong. My Big Brother has been living in seclusion for many years and has repeatedly declined our guests’ requests for an audience. It is only because he heard that Brother Feng’s skills in the art of sword have reached the extreme and felt his admiration soaring, did he decide to invite Brother Feng for a private meeting. We certainly dare not to show any disrespect to Brother Tong,” Mr. Black-White explained.

“I understand. I understand,” Xiang Wentian replied.

Setting his wine cup down on the table, Linghu Chong followed Mr. Black-White out of the game room. He went empty-handed, thinking that it would be inappropriate to bring a long sword with him in the meeting with the lord of the manor.

They crossed through a long corridor and soon arrived at a moon-shaped entry. The tablet above the entry read “Zither Spirit.” The words were made of blue colored glaze and showed vigorous style, most likely the creation of Mr. Bald-Brush. After the moon-shaped entry, a quiet and deep flower-strewn pathway extended further. On both sides of the pathway, thin and long bamboos swayed leisurely in the breeze. The cobblestones in the pathway were covered by moss, clearly indicating that this was a path seldom used. At the end of the pathway were three stone buildings. Seven or eight dark green pine trees stood at the front and the back, each towering high with their branches extending gracefully in all directions, casting a layer of gloom to the surroundings.

Mr. Black-White slowly pushed the door open. “Please come in,” he said in a

gentle voice.

As soon as Linghu Chong entered the room, he smelled the pleasant fragrance of sandalwood.

“Big Brother, Huashan School’s Young Hero Feng is here,” Mr. Black-White introduced.

An old man walked out from the bedroom, cupping one hand in the other. “Please excuse my lack of manners for having not greeted Young Hero Feng properly. It is a great honor to have Young Hero Feng in our humble manor.”

The old man appeared to be about sixty years of age. Thin as a lath, and with the muscles on his face sinking deeply, he looked more like a skeleton with the exception of the two bright piercing eyes.

“It was I who took the liberty for the unannounced visit. I’ll have to ask for Senior Master’s pardon,” Linghu Chong said with a bow.

“That’s quite alright,” the man answered.

“My Big Brother’s name is Mr. Huang-Zhong.[86] I am sure Young Hero Feng has known that already,” Mr. Black-White said.

“I have long heard the great names of the four Manor Masters. It is so fortunate that I finally get to meet you in person today,” Linghu Chong said as he thought to himself, “This is quite a joke that Big Brother Xiang has played on me. He didn’t tell me anything beforehand and only told me to let him arrange everything. But now he is nowhere near me. If this First Master here gives me some difficult puzzles to solve, I wonder how I should handle them.”

“I heard that Young Hero Feng is the very disciple of the venerable Grandmaster Feng of the Huashan School and possesses brilliant sword skills,” Mr. Huang-Zhong said. “I’ve always admired Grandmaster Feng’s conducts and his martial arts skills very much. It is such a pity that I never had the honor to meet him. Some time back, it was said around the Martial World that the venerable Grandmaster Feng had passed away. The news brought deep sorrow in my heart. Today, to have the opportunity to meet venerable Grandmaster

Feng's disciple is very gratifying. Is Young Hero Feng a descendent of Grandmaster Feng?"

Linghu Chong thought inwardly, "Grand Uncle-Master Feng earnestly exhorted me to not reveal his whereabouts. Once Big Brother Xiang saw my sword techniques, he figured out that it must have been Grand Uncle-Master who taught me those. He not only wantonly made that widely known, but also claimed that my last name was none other than Feng, which probably had a good amount of swindle and bluff. But if I tell the truth straightforward, it wouldn't be appropriate, either." At that thought, he gave an ambiguous answer, "I am a junior of his later generation. I've only studied from him for a short while. Being a slow learner, simple and uninformed, I haven't even mastered ten or twenty percent of his sword arts."

"If it is true that you have only learned ten to twenty percent of Grandmaster Feng's sword arts, yet my three brothers have all lost to your long sword, then venerable Grandmaster Feng's attainments had to be fathomless," Mr. Huang-Zhong sighed.

"The three Masters only each exchanged a few random moves with me, and before any of the matches had any result, they had already held back their hands," Linghu Chong said.

Mr. Huang-Zhong nodded, his skinny face revealing a slight smile. "It is rare to see a young man free from arrogance and rashness. Please come in to the Zither Hall and have some tea," he said.

Linghu Chong and Mr. Black-White followed him into the Zither Hall and seated. Soon, a servant boy brought out green tea.

"I heard that Young Hero Feng has the ancient music score of the 'Guang-Ling Song.' Is it true?" Mr. Huang-Zhong asked. "I am rather fond of music. And I've always bemoaned when I thought of how Ji Kang played the 'Guang-Ling Song' with his zither one last time just before his execution, exclaiming, 'Guang-Ling Song would be lost for ever from now on.' If this music can reappear in the world, and I get to follow the music score and play it once in my old age, I

would have no regret left in this life." At these words, his pale face actually showed some redness of skin, looking earnest and anxious.

"Big Brother Xiang's one lie after another really fooled them well," Linghu Chong thought to himself. "I can tell that these four Masters of the Plum Manor of the Lone Hill are no ordinary people. Besides, I am here to ask them to treat my injury. How can I keep them guessing? If this music score is really the 'Guang-Ling Song' Senior Master Qu Yang obtained from the tomb of that Cai-Somebody of the East Han Dynasty, I should let him take a look."

Retrieving the music score from his chest pocket, he stood up and then presented it with both hands. "Please take a look, First Master."

Mr. Huang-Zhong raised himself slightly and took the booklet. "The 'Guang-Ling Song' music had been long lost in the world. It is so exhilarating to be able to take a look at the legendary ancient score. But…but I wonder…." He seemed to implicate that how would he be sure that this music score was the authentic "Gang-Ling Song," not a counterfeit some busybody had faked to fool people.

He thumbed through a few pages at random and then muttered, "Oh, this is a long piece." Turning back to the first page, he began reading the details. Only moments into it, his face had changed color. Flipping through the music score with his right hand, he set his left hand on the table and the five fingers plucked, twiddled, and pressed as though he was playing an invisible zither.

"Marvelous! Peaceful and fair, yet melodious and deep to the extreme," he praised.

Turning to the second page, he read for a little while and then praised again, "Lofty and elegant, profound and abstruse. Just by imagining the sounds in my head, I can already feel the utter exhilaration."

Seeing how Mr. Huang-Zhong was already slightly out of his mind after reading only two pages of the music score, Mr. Black-White knew that if he kept reading, it would be hours before he'll even take a break. So he cut in.

"This Young Hero Feng here and a Brother Tong from the Songshan School came here and said that if someone in the Plum Manor can defeat his sword

art….”

“Um, only if someone can defeat his sword art will he be willing to loan me the ‘Guang-Ling Song’ and make a copy, is that right?” Mr. Huang-Zhong asked.

“That’s right! All three of us have lost our matches. Unless Big Brother takes the field, our Plum Manor of the Lone Hill…well…,” Mr. Black-White replied.

“If you can’t do it, I can’t either,” Mr. Huang-Zhong let out a light smile.

“How can the three of us be comparable with Big Brother?” Mr. Black-White said.

“I am too old. I am of no use now,” Mr. Huang-Zhong replied.

Linghu Chong got back onto his feet. “First Master’s name is ‘Mr. Huang-Zhong,’ then naturally you are an expert in the art of zither,” he said. “Although this music score is rare, it is not classified secret or anything. First Master, please feel free to hold on to it and make copies. I can come back to pick it up three days from now.”

Mr. Huang-Zhong and Mr. Black-White were both taken aback. Mr. Black-White had witnessed, himself, how Xiang Wentian had worked hard at baiting them, deliberately making things more difficult and made his heart itchy as hell. He certainly did not expect to see such a generous Feng Er-Zhong. Being an expert in the art of gamesmanship, he immediately concluded that this had to be a trap Linghu Chong was setting up to trick Mr. Huang-Zhong, but no matter how hard he tried, he still failed catch any clue.

“One does not receive a reward without making a merit. You and I don’t have any prior association. How could I accept such a generous gift from you? Will you please be very frank with me and tell me the real reason for you and your companion’s visit to our humble manor?” Mr. Huang-Zhong asked.

Linghu Chong thought, “Big Brother Xiang didn’t mention a word to me about why we are visiting the Plum Manor beforehand. I suppose it must have something to do with asking the four Manor Masters to treat my injury. But all his arrangements seemed so secretive. Besides, the four Manor Masters are all

very unusual people. Perhaps telling them the truth isn't the right way to address the issue. I honestly don't have a clue about the intention of Big Brother Xiang's visit, anyway. I guess telling them this part frankly wouldn't count as trying to deceive them intentionally." So he said, "I was only accompanying Big Brother Tong in the visit to your respectable manor. To be very honest with you, before stepping into your respectable manor, I have never heard of the names of the four Manor Masters, nor was I ever aware of the existence of the Plum Manor of the Lone Hill." After a short pause, he added, "That is, of course, only because I am ignorant and ill-informed, and consequently failed to recognize the many respectable senior masters in the Martial World. I beg the two Masters' pardon."

Mr. Huang-Zhong cast a glance toward Mr. Black-White and a smile crept onto his face.

"Young Hero Feng is very candid, and I am very thankful. Us, the four brothers, retired to the city of Lin-An to live a hermit's life; few people in the Martial World knows about it. Besides, the Five Mountains Sword Alliance never had any association with us, so I was quite surprised to learn about your visit. So Young Hero Feng really has no idea about the origin of us the four brothers, have you?"

"This is so embarrassing. When I said earlier that 'I have long heard the great names of the four Manor Masters,' actually…actually…well…," Linghu Chong murmured.

Mr. Huang-Zhong nodded. "Mr. Huang-Zhong, Mr. Black-White and so forth are only nicknames we picked for ourselves. Our true names have long been abandoned. It is only natural that Young Hero Feng has never heard of our names," he said. Turning the music score booklet with his right hand, he asked, "Are you sincere about loaning this music score to me and let me make copies?"

"Yes," Linghu Chong affirmed. "I said loaning the book to you only because the music score belongs to Big Brother Tong. Otherwise, you can just go ahead and take it. Like the old saying says, 'A precious sword should be presented to a person of high endeavor.' Once presented, there's no need to return it."

Mr. Huang-Zhong let out a long breath, and a trace of joy quickly flashed across his emaciated face.

"You agree to loan the music score to my Big Brother. But will that Brother Tong agree as well?" Mr. Black-White asked.

"Big Brother Tong and I are friends until death. He is bold and generous. If I agree to something, no matter how important the matter is, he wouldn't mind at all," Linghu Chong assured, to which Mr. Black-White gave a nod.

"I am very grateful for Young Hero Feng's kindness. But since Brother Tong did not give his consent, himself, I am still very uneasy about it. That Brother Tong said that in order to get the music score, someone from our manor must be able to defeat your sword arts. It would be unfair for me to take advantage of your generosity. Why don't we exchange a few moves?" Mr. Huang-Zhong proposed.

Linghu Chong thought to himself, "The Second Master said just a moment ago, 'How can the three of us be comparable with Big Brother?' Then the Kung Fu skills of the First Master must have been superior to the other three Manor Masters. The three Manor Masters each had unsurpassed Kung Fu skills, and only with the sword techniques I learned from Grand Uncle-Master Feng was I able to get the upper hand in the matches. If I spar with the First Master, I may not win again. Why bother bringing shame onto myself for no reason? Even if I could beat him in the match, what good does it do?" At that thought, he said, "Big Brother Tong was just seized by a whim and being meddlesome when he said something like that, which only embarrassed me more. I am already thankful that the four Manor Masters decide to spare me of reprimand for my arrogance. How dare I spar again with the First Master?"

"You are quite all right," Mr. Huang-Zhong smiled. "Let's exchange a few moves, and it'll just be a harmless contest. That is all. What's there to worry about?"

He turned around, removed a jade flute from the wall and handed it to Linghu Chong. "You can use the flute as your sword. I, on the other hand, will use my

zither as my weapon." Picking up a zither from the bedside table, he said with a grin, "I wouldn't say that these two musical instruments of mine are invaluable, but each of them is one in a thousand. I certainly do not want them to smash into pieces. Let's just put out some stances for the act. That's all."

Linghu Chong took a closer look at the flute in his hand. The entire body of the flute was in emerald green. Turned out that it was made of top-quality jade. The several spots close to the mouthpiece were in bright scarlet, and perfectly set off the striking green of the jade flute. The zither held in Mr. Huang-Zhong's hands appeared dark and ancient. It must have been an antique over one thousand years old. A gentle bump of the two musical instruments would have broken them into pieces. They of course couldn't be used in a real fight. Having no other excuses, he held the jade flute with both hands and spoke respectfully.

"I await First Master's advice."

"The venerable Grandmaster Feng was the ultimate swordsman of the generation. I've always had great admiration for him. The sword arts he taught must be extraordinary. Young Hero Feng, please!" Mr. Huang-Zhong said.

Holding the flute in his palm, Linghu Chong gave it a gentle swing. A few soft sounds echoed pleasantly as air went through the holes on the flute.

Mr. Huang-Zhong gave a few plucks to the strings of the zither. Amid the musical sounds, he pushed the end of the zither toward Linghu Chong's right shoulder.

At the sound of the zither, Linghu Chong felt a slight thump in his heart. He slowly dabbed the jade flute toward the back of Mr. Huang-Zhong's elbow. If the zither continued its course toward his shoulder, then the acupoint at the back of Mr. Huang-Zhong's elbow would have been hit first.

Turning the zither upside down, Mr. Huang-Zhong shoved it toward Linghu Chong's waist, instead. And as the zither struck forward, he plucked the strings and made more sounds.

Linghu Chong thought quickly, "If I block this strike with the jade flute, once the two precious instruments clashes, both would be damaged. In order to

preserve the musical instruments, he will certainly withdraw the zither. But fighting like that is really no different from the shameless act of a rascal."

With that in mind, he drew an arc with the jade flute and stabbed it below the opponent's armpit. Mr. Huang-Zhong raised his zither in an attempt to ward it off, but Linghu Chong quickly drew his flute back.

Suddenly, Mr. Huang-Zhong played several consecutive notes with the zither and the sound of the music turned pressing and the complexion on Mr. Black-White's face changed slightly. Slowly, Mr. Black-White backed out of the Zither Hall, shutting the door on his way out. knowing that Mr. Huang-Zhong was, by no means, showing his leisure when he made the musical notes with the zither. He had actually infused superior inner strength into the zither sounds in order to disrupt his opponent's concentration. Once the opponent's internal strength resonated with the zither sounds, then he would be controlled by the zither sounds involuntarily. When the zither music slowed down, the opponent's movement would also slow down; when the zither music hurried, the opponent's movement would also hurry. But the tempo of Mr. Huang-Zhong's zither moves would be just the opposite to the tempo of the zither music. His strikes would become faster and faster while the zither music turned more soothing and relaxing, as a result, the opponent would stand no chance of withstanding his attacks. Mr. Black-White knew very well that this Kung Fu of Mr. Huang-Zhong was no trivia matter. Afraid that his own internal strength would be worn off, he receded out of the Zither Hall.

Although the door plank separated him from the Zither Hall, he could still vaguely hear the zither music slowing down and going faster from time to time. Sometimes, the zither sound would suddenly silence, while some other times, the zither sound would all of a sudden clang very loudly. After a while, the tempo of the zither music became faster and faster. Mr. Black-White only felt his heart fluttering with uneasiness and even his breathing became somewhat uncomfortable. Backed out of the front door, he, once again, shut the front door tight. Now with two doors in between, the sound of the zither was almost inaudible. But occasionally when the sound of the zither turned sonorous and

passed through all the barriers, it always made his heart thump faster.

He stood there for a good while but the zither sounds kept going and going. He was astounded. “This young man named Feng, no doubt, has excellent sword skills. But it turned out that his cultivation in inner strength is also so capable. How is he able to hold out for so long under the attack of my Big Brother’s ‘Seven-String Invisible Sword’?” he thought. As he pondered upon the question, Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint arrived side by side.

“How did it go?” Mr. Paint asked in a low voice.

“The fight has lasted a long time. That young man is still struggling to keep up. I am afraid Big Brother will end up injuring him,” Mr. Black-White said.

“I’ll go ask Big Brother to show leniency. We can’t hurt this good friend,” Mr. Paint suggested.

“We can’t go in there,” Mr. Black-White shook his head.

Just at that moment, loud clanking sounds from the zither suddenly exploded in the air. At the first sound, the three of them each took one step back. So after five consecutive zither sounds, the three of them took a total of five steps back involuntarily.

Mr. Bald-Brush’s face turned as white as a sheet. After taking a few seconds to collect himself, he said, “This ‘Six-Ding-God Quarry a Mountain’ move of Big Brother’s Invisible Sword Art is too powerful. The six consecutive notes continue to wallop and strike one after another. How can that young man Feng withstand it?”

Before he even finished his sentence, another loud clank exploded, and immediately after that, several cracking sounds followed, as though several zither strings had suddenly snapped. Astounded, Mr. Black-White and the other two pushed the front door wide open and dashed in. As soon as they opened the door of the Zither Hall, they saw a dispirited Mr. Huang-Zhong standing still in silence. All seven strings of the zither in his grip had snapped and drooped by the side of the zither. Standing by his side was Linghu Chong, holding the jade flute in his hand.

“Please pardon me!” Linghu Chong said, bowing down slightly.

Obviously, just like the others, Mr. Huang-Zhong had lost the match.

Mr. Black-White and his two junior brothers gasped in astonishment. They knew very well that their Big Brother had very vigorous and resourceful inner strength and was, in fact, an extraordinary figure in the Martial World. Who would have expected that he would lose to this young man from the Huashan School just as well? If they hadn’t seen it with their own eyes, they would never have believed it.

“Not only is Young Hero Feng’s sword art the most ingenious sword art I have ever seen in my life, his inner strength cultivation is also so incredibly capable. It is very admirable, indeed,” Mr. Huang-Zhong said with a wry smile. “I had always thought that this ‘Seven-String Invisible Sword’ Kung Fu of mine could be regarded as a consummate skill in the Martial World. Who would have thought that it looked merely like a child’s play in front of Young Hero Feng? We, the four brothers, have been living a hermit’s life in the Plum Manor and haven’t set foot in the Martial World for more than ten years. Alas, turned out we have all become frogs living at the bottom of a well.”[87] His voice turned bleak.

“I had to do my utmost to keep up. Thanks for Senior Master’s leniency,” Linghu Chong said.

Mr. Huang-Zhong heaved a long sigh, but did not answer. Shaking his head dishearteningly, he sat down, his face dreary and desolate.

Seeing the utter gloominess on Mr. Huang-Zhong’s face, Linghu Chong felt very sorry. He thought to himself, “Big Brother Xiang apparently did not want to review the fact that I have lost all my inner strength, so as not to make them aware of my intent to ask for treatment, thus, void any obstacles that might arise. But a real man should be as open as the day. I can’t take advantage of him like that.” At that thought, he said, “First Master, there’s something I must tell. The reason why I was immune to the invisible energy attacks coming out of your zither was not because of advanced inner strength cultivation on my part. It was

really because I have no inner strength in me, none whatsoever!"

"What did you say?" Mr. Huang-Zhong stood up, taken by surprise.

"I was injured many times and have lost all my inner strength. That's why the sound of your zither had no effect on me," Linghu Chong explained.

"Are you serious?" Mr. Huang-Zhong asked, his voice quavered from mingled shock and joy.

"If Senior Master does not believe me, check my pulse and you'll see," Linghu Chong replied and extended his right hand forward.

Mr. Huang-Zhong and Mr. Black-White were both taken completely by surprise. In their minds, although Linghu Chong's coming to the Plum Manor was not hostile, he must have been up to no good, after all. How could he give out his hand so unperturbedly and hand his lifelines over to others? If Mr. Huang-Zhong suddenly grabbed hold of the acupoint on his wrist using the pretext of checking his pulse, then even if he had all the skills in the world, he would not be able to use any of them and wind up being at the mercy of others like a piece of meat sitting on the chopping block.

Earlier, when Mr. Huang-Zhong had initiated his "Six-Ding-God Quarry a Mountain" Kung Fu, not only had it failed to affect Linghu Chong in the least, at the peak of his inner strength discharge when all seven strings resonated, he actually ended up breaking seven strings all together. Such a crushing defeat was certainly hard to resign to. "If you want me to reach my hand forward so you can clasp the acupoint on my wrist, then we'll just have another contest in the inner strength," he made up his mind and then slowly stretched his right hand forward toward the artery on Linghu Chong's right wrist. In the stretch, he had secretly included the "Tiger Claw Technique", the "Dragon Claw Skill", and the "Small Joints Eighteen Holding Positions" these three advanced joint manipulation Kung Fu, so regardless of what moves the opponent might execute, when worst comes to worst, he would simply fail to grab the opponent's wrist, but his opponent would not be able to take any advantage of him, either.

But when Mr. Huang-Zhong's five fingers touched Linghu Chong's wrist, Linghu Chong didn't even move a muscle, showing no sign of an attack. Slightly taken aback, Mr. Huang-Zhong quickly noticed how feeble and frail Linghu Chong's pulses were, clearly indicating that he had no inner strength at all. After a short daze, he suddenly broke into loud laughter.

"I see! So that's how it is! You bamboozled me! You have really bamboozled me well!"

Although he kept saying that he was bamboozled, the expression on his face was actually very delightful. His "Seven-String Invisible Sword" Kung Fu was only made up of zither sounds. The sound itself of course could not injure the enemy. All it did was to stimulate and manipulate the enemy's inner strength, thus disrupting the enemy's moves. The stronger the enemy's inner strength was, the stronger his reaction to the zither sound would turn out. He certainly had not expected Linghu Chong to have no inner strength at all, and consequently, the "Seven-String Invisible Sword" having the least bit of effect on him. Having suffered a severe defeat, Mr. Huang-Zhong had been completely disheartened. But after he found out that the reason he lost the match was not because his unique skill, which he trained for many decades diligently, was no good, he found himself wild with joy. Grabbing Linghu Chong's hand tightly, he shook it back and forth in excitement.

"Good Brother! Good Brother! Why are you telling me your secret?" he asked, beaming.

"Well, during our match, it was already quite selfish of me to conceal the fact that I lost all my inner strength. How could I keep deceiving you on that? Senior Master was playing music to an ox, and I just happen to be the ox that understood none of the elegance." Linghu Chong grinned.

"I guess my 'Seven-String Invisible Sword' is no garbage after all. For a moment, I thought my 'Seven-String Invisible Sword' actually turned into 'Broken-String Unusable Sword'. Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" Mr. Huang-Zhong stroked his long beard and let out more laughter.

“Young Hero Feng! We, the four brothers, are very grateful for your honesty. But didn’t you know that once you reveal your own weakness, if we want to take your life, it would be as easy as turning our hands over? Although you have excellent sword skills, without any inner strength, you will be no match for us after all,” Mr. Black-White said.

“Second Master is absolutely right. I only told the truth because I can tell that the four Manor Masters are all trustworthy heroes,” Linghu Chong replied.

“Well said! Well said!” Mr. Huang-Zhong nodded at those words. “Brother Feng, you might as well speak frankly and tell us your intention for your visit. We, the four brothers feel like you are almost an old friend of ours even though this is the first time we ever meet. As far as our capacity allows, you can ask us for anything.”

Mr. Bald-Brush also said, “You lost all your inner strength most probably because of a severe injury. I have a very intimate friend whose medical skills are almost godlike. Only that he is kind of eccentric and wouldn’t take in patients easily. But for my sake, I am sure he’d be willing to treat you. The ‘Killer Doctor’ Ping One-Finger and I have been good friends….”

“Did you say Ping One-Finger, Doctor Ping?” Linghu Chong cried out involuntarily.

“That’s right. You’ve heard of his name before, haven’t you?” Mr. Bald-Brush answered.

“Doctor Ping passed away on the Five-Tyrant Ridge in Shandong Province several months ago.” Linghu Chong’s voice turned gloomy.

“What?” Mr. Bald-Brush cried out in shock. “He…he died?”

“He could have cured any disease in the world. How come he wasn’t able to cure his own illness? Oh, was he killed by his personal enemy?” Mr. Paint asked.

Linghu Chong shook his head. He had always felt ashamed of himself for the death of Ping One-Finger.

“Doctor Ping checked my pulse right before he passed away. He said that my injury was too weird and he could not cure me.”

The sudden news of Ping One-Finger’s death struck Mr. Bald-Brush hard. He stared blankly in front of him and soon tears emerged from his eyes.

“Brother Feng, let me point you a direction. But whether he’ll do it or not, it’s hard to say,” after pondering for a long while, Mr. Huang-Zhong finally said. “I’ll write you a letter, and you can take the letter with you and request an audience from the Head Master of the Shaolin Temple, Great Master Fang-Zheng. If he agrees to teach you the ultimate inner strength Kung Fu of the Shaolin School, the Tendon Altering Sutra, then there is a good chance that you’ll be able to regain your inner strength. The Tendon Altering Sutra is the most valued Kung Fu of the Shaolin School, which is not to be taught to any outsider. But many years ago, Great Master Fang-Zheng owed me some gratitude. Maybe he’ll do me a favor for personal consideration and make an exception.”

Linghu Chong knew that both Mr. Bald-Brush’s recommendation of Ping One-Finger and Mr. Huang-Zhong’s direction to Great Master Fang-Zheng were both right to the core of the problem, and both recommendations were made wholeheartedly. It was obvious that the two Manor Masters were not only exceptionally insightful, but also sincerely zealous about his wellbeing. Feeling utterly grateful, he said, “Great Master Fang-Zheng only teaches the ‘Tendon Altering Sutra’ to apprentices of his own school, but it wouldn’t be proper for me to join the Shaolin School. It is very difficult situation.”

After standing up and making a deep bow, he spoke again, “I am very grateful for the four Manor Masters’ kindness. Life and death lie in the lap of the gods. My injury is really not a big deal, and it is certainly not my intention to worry the four Manor Masters. I think it’s time for me to say good-bye.”

“Please wait,” Mr. Huang-Zhong said. Turning around, he went into the inner room, and not long after, he returned with a small china bottle in his hand. “Here are two herbal pills bestowed upon me by my respectable Master many years ago. They are quite effective in nourishing health and healing wounds. Please

accept them as my gift, little brother, as a small token to celebrate our meeting today."

The cork on the small bottle appeared worn and ancient. Linghu Chong knew that if Mr. Huang-Zhong had kept this relic from his deceased Master for all these years, they had to be very precious. So he replied immediately, "These pills were bestowed from Senior Master's respectable Master, not just any ordinary pills. I dare not accept it!"

Mr. Huang-Zhong shook his head. "The four of us have separated ourselves from the Martial World for many years and no longer strive with other people. These catholicons for injuries are really no good to us. The four brothers of us have neither apprentices, nor children. If you insist on declining, I suppose these two pills would only end up accompanying me in my coffin."

Sensing the bleakness in Mr. Huang-Zhong's voice, Linghu Chong did not insist any further and accepted the gift, thanking him earnestly. After bidding his farewell, he headed back to the Game Room with Mr. Black-White, Mr. Bald-Brush, and Mr. Paint accompanying by the side. As soon as Xiang Wentian spotted the solemn expression on the four's faces, he knew immediately that Linghu Chong must have won yet another sword match against the First Master of the manor. If the First Master had won the match, then even though Mr. Black-White might still maintain his composure, Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint, fore sure, would have turned daring and militant, demanding Zhang Xu's calligraphy book and Fan Kuan's painting from him at the first sight of him.

"Brother Feng, did First Master give you some good pointers as regard to your sword skills?" he asked, pretending he had not a clue.

"The prowess of First Master's inner strength was simply unimaginable. But it just happens that I have lost all my inner strength and therefore, did not react to the inner strength released from First Master's zither at all. It was such incredible luck on my side," Linghu Chong explained.

"This Brother Feng here is an honest gentleman and did not keep back anything. Why did you say that his inner strength was far superior to yours and

deceive my Big Brother big time?" Mr. Paint reprehended, glaring at Xiang Wentian as he spoke.

"But at the time when Brother Feng still had his inner strength, his inner strength was indeed far superior to mine. I was referring to before, not now," Xiang Wentian grinned.

"You are a bad person!" Mr. Bald-Brush grunted.

"Well, since no one in the Plum Manor can defeat my Brother Feng's sword. Three Manor Masters, I think it's time for us to say good-bye," Xiang Wentian cupped his hands. Turning toward Linghu Chong, he said, "Let's go."

Linghu Chong also cupped his hands and bowed. "It was a great pleasure to meet the four Manor Masters today. If the chance rises up in the future, I'll visit your Manor once again."

"Brother Feng, if you feel like coming over to drink some wine, you can come any day. I'll let you taste all the great wines I collected throughout the years. But in regard to this Brother Tong here, well! Well!" Mr. Paint said.

"With my small capacity for liquor, I certainly dare not to come and ask for trouble." Xiang Wentian showed a smile.

After cupping his hands one more time, he walked out, holding Linghu Chong's arms. Mr. Black-White and the others also walked out.

"Three Manor Masters please don't bother to see us out," Xiang Wentian said.

"Ha, do you think we are seeing you out? We are here to see Brother Feng off. If you had come all by yourself, Brother Tong, just watch us and see how many steps we'll take to see you off," Mr. Bald-Brush said.

"I see," Xiang Wentian grinned.

Mr. Black-White and the others walked all the way out of the manor gate before saying good-bye to Linghu Chong. Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint stared at Xiang Wentian all the way out. How they wished they could just snatch the package off Xiang Wentian's back.

Holding Linghu Chong's hand, Xiang Wentian walked deep into the willow woods. When they were far from the Plum Manor, he finally asked, smiling, "Brother, the First Master's 'Invisible Sword' energy from his zither is very powerful. How did you manage to defeat him?"

"Oh, so Big Brother knew everything already. Luckily I have lost all my inner strength, or else I am afraid I probably would have lost my life over that. Big Brother, did you have some scores to settle with these four Manor Masters?" Linghu Chong asked.

"No. I'd never even met them before today, what scores could there be?" Xiang Wentian answered.

Suddenly, shouts came from behind. "Brother Tong! Brother Feng! Please come back."

Linghu Chong turned around and then saw Mr. Paint running toward him in quick trots. He held a bowl in his hand, which was more than half full with wine.

"Brother Feng, I have half a bottle of more than one-hundred-year old Bamboo-Green. You'd really regret it if you didn't have a taste," he said, handing the bowl over as he spoke.

Linghu Chong took the bowl and then took a look. The wine inside the bowl was so green that it almost looked like one solid emerald stone and he couldn't even see the bottom of the bowl. The strong and mellow smell of the wine soon filled his nostrils. "Great wine, indeed!" he praised.

"Excellent!" after a small sip of the wine, he praised again. Then with another four quick gulps, he poured the entire content of the bowl down his throat. "The flavor of the wine tastes mild yet rich at the same time. It had to the product from around the city of Yangzhou or Zhenjiang," he commented.

"Right on!" Mr. Paint beamed with delight. "This is the ultimate treasure of the Golden-Hill Temple in Zhenjiang. They had a total of six bottles. The monks in the temple abide by their commandment and do not drink, so they gave me one bottle as a present. After enjoying half of the bottle myself, I begrudged drinking

any more of it. Brother Feng, I have several more great wines at my place. I'd really like you to come over and judge them for me. What do you say?"

Linghu Chong was already feeling great intimacy toward the "Four Playfellows of Jiangnan," now with the prospect of tasting some great wine in addition, he found himself all jubilant. Turning his head over, he looked at Xiang Wentian for his reaction.

"Brother Feng, Fourth Master wants to invite you for some wine. You go ahead. As for me, since Third Master and Fourth Master gets grouchy when they see me, I think I'd better…um, well," Xiang Wentian said.

"Who said I get grouchy when I see you? Let's go. All of us! You are Brother Feng's friend, and you are invited too!" Mr. Paint smiled.

Before Xiang Wentian had any chance to decline, Mr. Paint had already coiled his left arm around Xiang Wentian's right arm and his right arm around Linghu Chong's left arm and began walking. "Come on! Come on! Let's have some more drinks!" he insisted, beaming brightly.

"When we bid our farewell to the Manor Masters earlier, Fourth Master showed a very unfriendly attitude toward Big Brother Xiang. Why has he turned so intimate all of a sudden? Is it possible that he simply couldn't forget the painting in the package on Big Brother Xiang's back for a moment and decided to fetch it using some other ways?" Linghu Chong thought to himself.

Soon, the three of them returned to the gate of the Plum Manor, at which Mr. Bald-Brush had been waiting for them.

"Brother Feng is back! Excellent! Excellent!" Mr. Bald-Brush uttered.

The four of them returned to the Game Room where Mr. Paint brought out many kinds of great wine and had a good drink with Linghu Chong. But Mr. Black-White never showed his face all the while.

The time was getting late now. It seemed as though Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint was waiting for someone, since both of them kept glancing toward the entrance from the corner of their eyes. Xiang Wentian took leave of them several

times, but the two hosts repeatedly urged him to stay. Linghu Chong, on the other hand, paid no attention to it and kept drinking his wine.

"If two Manor Masters do not invite us for dinner, I'll starve to death!" Xiang Wentian checked the color of the sky and then complained with a big grin.

"Right! Right!" Mr. Bald-Brush replied and then called out loudly, "Steward Ding, arrange the banquet! Hurry!"

Ding Jian acknowledged from outside when suddenly, the door was pushed open and Mr. Black-White stepped into the room.

"Brother Feng, there is another one in our manor who would like to have a sword contest with you," he said to Linghu Chong.

As soon as Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint heard these words, they jumped back onto their feet in unison, beaming with joy. "Big Brother has agreed!"

"So First Master had to give his permission before that person can have a sword contest with me," Linghu Chong thought inwardly. "It seems that they had kept me here so the Second Master could talk it over with the First Master. And only after a long plead did the First Master finally consent. Then this person must be either a junior in First Master's family or his disciple or underling of some sort. Is this person's sword skill really even better than that of the First Master?" Suddenly another thought popped into his brain and he groaned inwardly, "Oh no! They knew that I have lost all my inner strength. In consideration of their own status, they feel unbefitting doing it themselves. But if they send a junior or an subordinate to fight me and specially challenge me in the department of inner strength, it would take him no time to finish me off!" But then he thought, "These four Manor Masters are all fair champions. How could they commit such despicable act? But Third Master and Fourth Master are simply crazy about that painting and that calligraphy book, and although the Second Master looked calm from the outside, he would certainly not rest contented until he gets his hands on those game manuals. Well, using such a bad method for the sake of those painting, calligraphy book, and game manuals is still well within the logic. If anyone really wants to injure me using inner

strength, I'll just stab his joints or some crucial key points on his body first."

"Young Hero Feng, May I trouble you with another short trip?" Mr. Black-White asked.

"In regard to genuine Kung Fu skills, I am really no match for Third Master or Fourth Master, much less Second Master and First Master. The four senior masters of the Plum Manor of the Lone Hill all have unsurpassed Kung Fu skills. Only because of the congeniality you felt with me, you have been very tolerant and considerate. It is really needless for me to show my immature and shallow skills again," Linghu Chong declined.

"Brother Feng, of course that person's Kung Fu is higher than yours. But you don't need to be afraid. He…," Mr. Paint said, which was promptly cut off by Mr. Black-White.

"In our humble manor, there is yet another grandmaster who is an expert at the art of sword. Once he heard about Young Hero Feng's brilliant sword skills, he longed for a sword contest. I hope Young Hero Feng wouldn't mind having just one more match."

Afraid that he might be forced into injuring his opponent in the additional match and thus have a fall out with the "Four Playfellows of Jiangnan," Linghu Chong said, "Four Masters have been very kind to me. If I have this additional match, I wonder what kind of temper this grandmaster might have. If, for any reason, this ends in discord, or maybe I get injured from this grandmaster's sword, that would, for sure, hurt the friendly feelings."

"No worries! He won't…won't…," Mr. Paint tried to comfort him, but again, Mr. Black-White didn't let him finish.

"No matter what happens, the four of us will never blame you, Young Hero Feng," Mr. Black-White assured him.

"Fine! You might as well have another match," Xiang Wentian said. "But I have some things I need to take care right away and can't stay any longer. Brother Feng, I'll see you again in the city of Jiaxing."

“Are you leaving already? You can’t leave yet!” Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint cried out in unison.

“Unless you leave Zhang Xu’s calligraphy book behind,” Mr. Bald-Brush demanded.

“If you leave now, where are we going to find you to get your painting, calligraphy book, and game manuals after Young Hero Feng loses the match? No, no, you’ll have to stay just a little bit longer. Steward Ding, hurry up with the banquet!” Mr. Paint shouted.

“Young Hero Feng, I’ll go with you. Brother Tong, please have something to eat. We’ll be right back to accompany you. It won’t take very long,” Mr. Black-White said.

But Xiang Wentian shook his head again and again. “You are after a sure triumph with this match. Although my Brother Feng has excellent mastery in the art of the sword, his experience in confrontations is still very shallow. Besides, you have already found out that he has lost all his inner strength. Without me guarding onsite, even if we lose this match, we would not be reconciled to the defeat.”

“What is Brother Tong saying here? Do you really think that we would cheat in the match?” Mr. Black-White asked.

“The four Masters of the Plum Manor of the Lone Hill are all people of exceptional virtues. I’ve always held the four masters in great reverence and, of course, have faith in you. But Brother Feng is having the sword match with someone else. I really had no idea that there’s actually another grandmaster in the Plum Manor besides the four Manor Masters. May I ask Second Master here who is this person? If I know that this person is an honest had straightforward champion just like the four Manor Masters, then I’ll feel much more at ease,” Xiang Wentian said.

“The Kung Fu skills and the fame of this person are only higher than the four brothers of us. There is simply no comparison between him and us,” Mr. Paint said.

“In the Marital World, there are only a few people whose fame could be in comparison with that of the four Manor Masters. Then I am sure I must have heard of his name before,” Xiang Wentian said.

“But we can’t tell you his name,” Mr. Bald-Brush answered.

“Then I must guard onsite during this match. Otherwise we can just forget about the match,” Xiang Wentian insisted.

“Brother Tong, why are you so stubborn? It’s not gonna do you any good coming to this match. This person has lived in seclusion for a long time and would rather not let any other people see his face,” Mr. Paint explained.

“How does Brother Feng have the sword contest with him, then?” Xiang Wentian asked.

“Each side will be wearing a mask, exposing only the eyes. That way, neither could see the other,” Mr. Black-White clarified.

“Will the Four Manor Masters be wearing masks as well?” Xiang Wentian asked.

“That’s correct. This person has very eccentric tempers. If we don’t, he would not fight,” Mr. Black-White affirmed.

“I’ll just wear a mask as well,” Xiang Wentian persisted.

After a long hesitation, Mr. Black-White finally said, “If Brother Tong is determined to watch the match onsite, I suppose we have no choice. But Brother Tong must make a promise that you’ll not make any sound through out the match.”

“Pretending to be deaf and dumb, that’s easy!” Xiang Wentian grinned.

So Mr. Black-White lead the way in the front, Xiang Wentian and Linghu Chong followed in the middle and Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint followed behind. Linghu Chong couldn’t help but notice that they were actually following the same path that led to First Master’s house earlier. Soon, they arrived outside of First Master’s Zither Hall. After three gentle knocks on the door, Mr. Black-White pushed the door open and stepped in. A man already stood in the middle

of the room, a mask made of black cloth covered his head. Linghu Chong easily recognized him as Mr. Huang-Zhong from his clothing. Mr. Black-White walked next to him and then whispered some words in his ears. Then Mr. Huang-Zhong shook his head and whispered some words back, obviously unwilling to let Xiang Wentian participate. Mr. Black-White gave a nod and then turned to the group behind him.

"My Big Brother thinks that the sword match is only a small matter. But if we provoke that friend in any way, there will be much unnecessary trouble. Let's call the match off."

The five of them bowed to Mr. Huang-Zhong and then went out of the room.

"Brother Tong, you are really an oddball, you know that?" Mr. Paint said irritably. "Did you think that we would just all swarm forward and bully Brother Feng? Well, your insisting on looking on the match has really cost us the match. Thank you for ruining the day for us!"

"It took Second Brother a great effort to convince Big Brother and get his permission. You'd rather make more trouble," Mr. Bald-Brush grunted.

"All right! All right! I'll yield a step. I won't insist on watching this match. But you have to promise that it's going to be a fair match and you won't deceive my Brother Feng," Xiang Wentian said with a grin.

"What kind of people did you think we were? We'd never deceive Young Hero Feng!" Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint cried out with joy in unison.

"I'll wait for you guys in the Game Room," Xiang Wentian said, smiling. "Brother Feng, I don't know what kind of clandestine tricks they are trying to pull here. You'd better keep a weather eye open all the time and be very careful."

"The Plum Manor only has gentlemen with lofty virtues. How can there be anyone resorting to trickery and swindle?" Linghu Chong replied with a smile.

"Right on! Young Hero Feng is not like you, who measure others' corn by one's own bushel." Mr. Paint showed a broad grin.

Xiang Wentian took a few steps and then turned around and waved at Linghu Chong. “Brother Feng, come over here. I’d better exhort you some more so you wouldn’t fall for other’s tricks,” he said, at which Mr. Paint sneered but paid no attention.

“Big Brother Xiang is being too careful. I am not a three-year-old kid. Even if they really plan on fooling me, it’s not gonna be easy,” Linghu Chong thought to himself as he walked toward Xiang Wentian.

Xiang Wentian grabbed hold of Linghu Chong’s hand, and immediately Linghu Chong felt a paper ball placed in his palm. A quick squeeze told Linghu Chong that there was a piece of hard object wrapped inside the paper ball. With a broad smile, Xiang Wentian pulled him closer and then whispered to his ears.

“After you see that person, shake his hands to show your proximity, and then secretly place this paper ball together with the object inside into his palm. This is a very important matter. Don’t take it lightly. Ha-ha! Ha-ha!”

When he said these words, the tone of his voice was very solemn, but he kept the broad smile on his face. The laughter at the end simply had nothing to do with his words. Mr. Black-White, Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint all presumed that he must have been ridiculing the three of them.

“What’s so funny? Young Hero Feng, no doubt, has excellent sword skills, but we haven’t had a chance to check out the sword skills of Brother Tong,” Mr. Paint challenged.

“My sword skills are most ordinary. There’s no need to check it out,” Xiang Wentian laughed out before waddling out of the room.

“Great! Let’s go see Big Brother again,” Mr. Paint said merrily.

The four of them entered Mr. Huang-Zhong’s Zither Hall once again. Mr. Huang Zhong did not expect their return and had already removed the mask from his head.

“Big Brother, we have finally convinced that Brother Tong. He has agreed to not watch the match,” Mr. Black-White said.

“Good,” Mr. Huang-Zhong replied. Picking up the black cloth mask, he put it back onto his head.

Mr. Paint pulled out a drawer from the wooden cabinet and took out three black cloth masks. He handed one of them to Linghu Chong and said, “This one is mine. You can wear it. Big Brother, I am borrowing your pillowcase.”

He went inside the bedroom and soon returned with a green cloth pillowcase over his head. Two holes had been cut off the pillowcase, showing his two eyes.

Mr. Huang-Zhong nodded his approval and then said to Linghu Chong, “When you have the sword context later, both of you will be using wooden swords in case inner strength is used is used and put Brother Feng into disadvantage.”

“That would be great!” Linghu Chong said happily.

“Second Brother, bring two wooden swords,” Mr. Huang-Zhong said to Mr. Black-White, who, in turn, pulled another drawer from the cabinet and took out two wooden swords.

“Brother Feng, regardless of who wins this contest, will you please not mention a word to anyone else?” Mr. Huang-Zhong said to Linghu Chong.

“That’s of course! I’ve said before that I didn’t come to the Plum Manor to make a name for myself. Why would I want to go out and make it widely known? Besides, there’s a high probability that I’ll be losing this match. What’s there to brag about?” Linghu Chong answered.

“Well, that’s not necessarily a sure thing, but I believe Brother Feng is a man of his words and won’t let the word out. Will you please also not mention a word about anything you see afterwards, not even to that Brother Tong? Do you think you can do that?” Mr. Huang-Zhong asked.

“Not even Big Brother Tong? After the sword contest, naturally he would ask me about the entire course. If I keep my mouth completely shut, isn’t it rather harsh for our friendship?” Linghu Chong hesitated.

“That Brother Tong is a worldly-wise man. Once he is made aware that

Brother Feng has made a promise to me, he would understand that a true man's promise is worth one thousand gold and you must make good your promise, then naturally he won't force you to tell against your will," Mr. Huang-Zhong said.

"That's true. I promise you," Linghu Chong agreed.

Mr. Huang-Zhong cupped his hands together. "Thank you for your understanding, Brother Feng! Let's go."

Turning on his heels, Linghu Chong began walking toward the outside. So when Mr. Paint pointed toward the bedroom and said, "This way," Linghu Chong was completely taken by surprise. "How come we are going into the bedroom?" he thought, but then he immediately came up with an answer, "Oh, I see. The person who will have the sword contest with me is a woman. Maybe she is First Master's wife or a female relative. That's why they insisted on not having Big Brother Xiang watching the match by the side. They don't want her to see my face and don't want me to see her face, either, all because males and females should be distinguished. And First Master urged me again and again to not mention a word to anybody else, not even to Big Brother Xiang. If it weren't because it had something to do with a female, why would they be so serious?"

Once he figured this part out, all his suspicions suddenly cleared away, then when he felt the paper ball and the small hard object inside in his palm, he thought inwardly, "It looks as though all Big Brother Xiang's careful and shrewd arrangement only are for one purpose: to enable him to pay a visit to that woman. Since he couldn't see her himself, he entrusted me to pass a letter and a keepsake to her. Then there must have been some kind of an obscure affair between them. Even though Big Brother Xiang is my sworn-brother, the four Manor Masters have also been very kind to me. If I pass these along, it would really be unfair to the four Manor Masters. What should I do?" Then he thought, "Big Brother Xiang and the four Manor Masters are all people well above their fifties or sixties. That woman must have not been young, either. Even if there was intertwined love relationship involved here, it had to be a past thing many years ago. I suppose passing this letter along wouldn't damage the woman's

chastity.”

While he was muttering to himself, the five of them had entered the inner bedroom. The arrangement in the room was very simply, with only a bed and a small table. The gauze bed-curtain hung above the bed appeared antiquated and showed slight yellow. On top of the small table sat a short zither, completely black as though it was made of iron.

“Everything panned out as Big Brother Xiang planned. Alas, his love is so deep, how can I not help him fulfill this wish?” Linghu Chong thought.

He always had a carefree disposition and never cared much about the Confucian code of etiquette. At the moment, he vaguely felt as though that woman had turned into his little apprentice sister, Yue Lingshan, who had married her junior apprentice brother Lin Pingzhi, and he was Xiang Wentian, who was trying every possible way to pay another visit to little apprentice sister after several decades. When a meeting turned out to be impossible, he then tried to pass along a keepsake from the old days to merely express his feelings and slightly relieve the decades of lovesickness.

“Maybe it was also because of this old lover of his, Big Brother Xiang broke away from the Demon’s Cult and didn’t hesitate to have a complete fall out with the Chief and his fellow members in the cult,” Linghu Chong thought.

Amid his reverie, Mr. Huang-Zhong had already lifted the beddings on the bed, removed the bed board off the bed, exposing an iron plate with a copper ring attached to the top of it. With a tight grip at the copper ring, Mr. Huang-Zhong pulled upward, and a four-foot wide and five-foot long iron board rose up slowly, revealing a large rectangular-shaped opening. The iron plate was at least half-a-foot thick and appeared to be extremely heavy.

After placing the iron plate on the floor, Mr. Huang-Zhong said to Linghu Chong, “This person’s residence is kind of strange. Brother Feng, please follow me.” At those words, he jumped into the opening.

“After you, Young Hero Feng,” Mr. Black-White urged.

Very surprised, Linghu Chong followed suit and also jumped into the opening.

What he saw next was an oil lamp hanging from a wall, which illuminated the surroundings indistinctly. Where he stood now seemed to be the beginning of a tunnel. Following behind Mr. Huang-Zhong he walked forward, and soon Mr. Black-White and the rest of the people also jumped down one after another.

About twenty feet following the passageway, the tunnel seemed to have come to an end. Mr. Huang-Zhong took out a string of keys from his chest pocket and inserted one of them into a keyhole. Turning the key several times, he pushed forward; amid a series of scrunches, a stone gate slowly opened up.

Linghu Chong found himself more and more astounded, and at the meantime, felt more and more sympathy toward Xiang Wentian. “They have locked the woman up in a dungeon, then of course she was imprisoned against her will. These four Manor Masters all appeared to be man of kindheartedness and justice; how could they have committed such a contemptible deed?” he pondered.

He followed Mr. Huang-Zhong and entered the stone gate. The tunnel began to descend as the passageway extended in front them. After several hundred feet, another gate appeared in front of them, this time, an iron-gate. Taking the string of keys out once again, Mr. Hung-Zhong opened the iron-gate.

The tunnel kept descending deeper and deeper under the ground. By then they were probably over one thousand feet below the surface. The tunnel made a few turns when another gate met Linghu Chong’s eyes.

“I had thought that since the four Manor Masters are adept at music, gamesmanship, calligraphy, and painting, the ‘Four Arts’, they must have been persons of lofty virtues and poetic temperament. Who would have thought that they would set up private prisons and imprison a woman in such a hellhole that’s completely void of daylight and sunshine?” Linghu Chong felt resentment brewing inside his chest.

When he first entered the tunnel, he had no intention to watch out for the four Manor Masters, but at the moment he simply couldn’t help feeling his vigilance growing considerably. “They couldn’t defeat me in sword tests. Could it be

possible that they have lured me down here so they could imprison me here? There are gates after gates inside the tunnel, no one would be able to escape even if he was furnished with wings." That thought almost made him shudder. But with Mr. Huang-Zhong in front of him, Mr. Black-White, Mr. Bald-Brush, and Mr. Paint behind, and not a single weapon in his hands, he found himself quite helpless.

The third gateway actually consisted of four separate doors. Behind the iron door was a wooden door covered with cotton wadding nailed onto the door plank. Behind the wooden door stood another iron door, behind which was another wooden door covered with cotton waddling.

"Why have they placed two wooden doors covered with cotton wadding in between the two iron doors?" Linghu Chong wondered. "I got it. I suppose the prisoner has very formidable inner strength. The cotton wadding was used to absorb the fierce power from her palm and prevent her from breaking down the iron doors."

For the next one hundred feet or so, there were no more gates along the way. The oil lamps hung from the tunnel wall stood further and further from each other. In some sections of the tunnel, the oil lamps had long extinguished, leaving only complete darkness, and the pack had to feel their way forward for dozens of feet before seeing the next light.

The further they went, the harder it was to breathe, Linghu Chong found. Moreover, the tunnel wall and the tunnel floor had turned awfully damp. Suddenly, a thought came to his attention, "The Plum Manor sits on the bank of the West Lake. After walking for so long, we are probably deep underneath the West Lake by now. This person is locked up underneath the West Lake, not only is it impossible for her to escape by herself, it is also impossible for others to rescue her, because as soon as they dig open the tunnel wall, water from the lake would have poured in from above."

After another thirty or forty feet forward, the tunnel suddenly turned very narrow, and they had to bend their backs to proceed forward. The further they went, the lower they had to bend their backs. Another twenty feet later, Mr.

Huang-Zhong finally held his steps and took out his flint to light up the oil lamp on the tunnel wall. Before long another iron-door came into view under the dim light, an iron-door with a square-shaped opening one-foot wide.

"Mr. Ren, Huang-Zhong and his brothers have come to visit you!" Mr. Huang-Zhong spoke toward the square-shaped opening, loud and clear.

"What? How could it be Mr. Ren? Shouldn't the person locked inside a female?" Linghu Chong was taken aback.

But no response came from the inside.

"Mr. Ren, we are very regretful for not having sent our respects to you often. We have come today to inform you of an important matter," Mr. Huang-Zhong spoke again.

Suddenly a hoarse voice bellowed from inside the cell, "Important matter my ass! If you've got horseshit, unload it now! If not, get the hell out of here!"

Linghu Chong was dumbfounded. Instantly, all his previous fancy disappeared like mist and smoke. Not only did the voice belong to an old man, the words this man used were also so crude that they had to come from the mouth of a street vulgar.

"Before, we had always thought that when talking about exceptional sword masters of our time, Mr. Ren would undoubtedly be ranked as the number one on the chart. But how wrong we were! Today we had a visitor to the Plum Manor. The four brothers of us certainly were no match for him; even Mr. Ren's sword art would pale into insignificance by comparison," Mr. Huang-Zhong said.

"He is using mocking words to goad that man into entering a sword context with me," Linghu Chong thought to himself.

The man burst into loud laughter. "You four sons of bitches couldn't beat him, so you goaded him into sparring with me and hoped that I would take care of this tough enemy for you, didn't you, you scumbags? Ha-ha, what wishful thinking! Too bad that I haven't touched a sword for over ten years and have

completely forgotten all my sword skills. Why don't you just put your tail between your legs and get the hell out of here, you bloody bastards!"

Linghu Chong gasped with astonishment. "This man is so incredibly sharp-witted and could predict with miraculous accuracy. Just from Mr. Huang-Zhong's words he had figured everything out," he thought to himself.

"Big Brother, in no way would Mr. Ren be this person's rival. This person said that nobody in the Plum Manor could defeat him, and he wasn't overstating the case. There's no need to talk further with Mr. Ren," Mr. Bald-Brush said.

"Give it up! Provoking me won't cut it. Did you actually think I would do anything for you four bastards?" the man named Ren snarled.

"This person has truly mastered the sword skills taught by the venerable Grandmaster Feng Qingyang of the Huashan Sword School. Big Brother, I heard that years ago when Mr. Ren roamed the Martial World, he feared neither Heaven nor Earth, except one person – Grandmaster Feng. Mr. Ren's nickname was something like 'Flee at the Sight of the Wind', and the word 'wind' here refers to the venerable Grandmaster Feng Qingyang.[88] Is that true?" Mr. Bald-Brush asked.

"What stinking fart! Rubbish!" the man named Ren roared at these words.

"Third Brother said it wrong," Mr. Paint joined in.

"Why?" Mr. Bald-Brush asked.

"You got one word wrong," Mr. Paint elaborated. "Mr. Ren's nickname is not 'Flee at the Sight of the Wind'. It is 'Flee at the Sound of the Wind.' Now think about it. If Mr. Ren had already had Grandmaster Feng in his sight, the two of them couldn't have been very far from each other, and how could Grandmaster Feng have allowed him to get away? Only that as soon as he heard Grandmaster Feng's name mentioned he starts running right away, restless like a cur stray from his pack…."

"…and hasten like a fish slipping out of the net…," Mr. Bald-Brush added.

"…is he able to keep his head on his neck all the way till today!" Mr. Paint

completed the sentence.

The man named Ren seemed to be quite amused by these words and laughed out loud. “You four stinking bastards found yourself driven from pillar to post by him, and then thought that you could beg me to take him on. Go jump in the lake. Did you think I am so stupid to fall for your tricks?”

Mr. Huang-Zhong heaved a sigh. “Brother Feng,” he said to Linghu Chong, “this Mr. Ren here is already frightened out of his wits simply at the mentioning of the ‘Feng’ in your name. There’s no need for another sword match. We’ll just admit that you are the number one sword master in the entire world.”

Although Linghu Chong knew that he had imagined everything wrong when he found out that the person was not a woman, seeing him stuck in the dungeon, and obviously for a very long time, the feeling of sympathy soared in his heart spontaneously. From the tone of everybody, he deduced that this person had to be a very senior master with extraordinary Kung Fu skills. So when he heard Mr. Huang-Zhong’s words, he objected.

“First Master, it is not true. When Grandmaster Feng discussed sword arts with me, he held this…this venerable Mr. Ren in very high esteem. He said that in regard to sword masters of our time, the revered Mr. Ren was the only person he had admiration for and that if I were lucky to meet this Mr. Ren someday, I must kowtow to him with utter respect and ask for his advice with sincere desire.”

These words sent Mr. Huang-Zhong and his sworn brothers in complete shock while that Mr. Ren found himself on the high ropes. Laughing loudly, he said, “Little friend, what you said is very correct. Feng Qingyang is no ordinary swordsman. He, and only he, is capable of recognizing the subtlety of my sword arts.”

“Grand…Grandmaster Feng knows that he…he is here?” Mr. Huang-Zhong uttered. His voice quivered and Linghu Chong almost felt he sensed dread in his voice.

“Grandmaster Feng thought that the revered Mr. Ren had retired to a scenery

spot in a famous mountain," Linghu Chong decided to run wild with his made-up story. "During the time when he trained me in the art of sword, he had frequently mentioned about the revered Mr. Ren. He said that the only purpose of training in these sword moves was to fight revered Mr. Ren's students. If revered Mr. Ren never existed, then it would have become completely unnecessary to learn these very complicated sword moves."

By then he had become very discontented with the four Masters of the Plum Manor, thinking that the man named Ren must have been a champion of the past, and his captivity in the dark and degrading prison must have resulted from some sort of a despicable plot in secret set up by the four Manor Masters, so even his words carried much ridicule and sarcasm.

"Um, that's right, my little friend! Feng Qingyang really has some good insights. You got the better of these folks in the Plum Manor, didn't you?" The man named Ren asked.

"Well, since my sword skills were taught my Grandmaster Feng, himself, then unless it was you, Mr. Ren, or unless it was a student of yours, ordinary people of course wouldn't stand a chance," Linghu Chong replied.

By saying these words, he had publicly denounced Mr. Huang-Zhong and the bunch. The more he felt how dark, damp, and gloomy the dungeon was, the angrier he was at the four Manor Masters. He had only stayed here for a very short while and was already feeling awfully uncomfortable, but they had locked this senior master in this appalling place, a place completely unsuitable for human inhabitation, for god knows how many years. That was just atrocious. As the moral indignation grew rapidly inside him, he had no more scruple with the choice of his words, thinking that even if worst came to worst and they killed him on the spot, he wouldn't have cared any more.

When Mr. Huang-Zhong and the rest Manor Masters heard these words, they of course felt much snubbed. But they did lose their matches and had nothing to contradict.

"Brother Feng, what are you…?" Mr. Paint muttered, but after Mr. Black-

White gave his sleeve a tug, he held his tongue.

"Very good! Very good! Little friend, you've really given me a vent to my anger. Now tell me, how did you beat them?" the man asked.

"The first person from the Plum Manor to have sword match with me was a friend named Ding Jian with a nickname called something like 'Straight Line Lightning Sword'," Linghu Chong said.

"His sword moves are flash and without substance. He doesn't have any true skills, and all he does is to try to scare people with his sword flashes. You don't have to use any move sparring him. Just place your blade there and he'll send his fingers, wrists, or arms onto your blade and have them cut off, himself," the man said.

Feeling utterly astounded, the five listeners cried out in unison.

"What? Was I not right?" the man asked.

"You are absolutely right. It's almost like you have seen it with your own eyes," Linghu Chong answered.

"Great! Then did he cut off his five fingers or a hand?"

"I turned my sword blade a little bit," Linghu Chong said.

"Wrong! Wrong! Why be so nice to your enemy? You are too kindhearted and one day you'll for sure get the worse of it. So who was your second opponent?"

"It was Fourth Master."

"Um, Fourth's sword skills of course are better than that 'Straight Line Fart Sword', but not by much. After he saw you defeat Ding Jian, I bet that he'd be using that unique stun of his, which he prided himself on. Ah, what was that sword art called? Oh, yeah. It's called the 'Splashing Ink Slicing Hemp Sword Art', with something like 'White Aurora Shooting the Sun,' or 'Mounting Flood-Dragon and the Soaring Phoenix', or something like 'Willow Wickers Fluttering in the Spring Breeze'."

Hearing that the man was able to spell out his prided sword moves with such

accuracy, Mr. Paint found himself in an even bigger shock.

"Fourth Master's sword art was actually quite clever, except that it has too many flaws when he attacks," Linghu Chong said.

"Ha-ha, Old Feng's student certainly has a few tricks of the trade. You hit the mark with a single comment and have identified the deadly flaw in this 'Splashing Ink Splitting Hemp Sword Art' of his. Within this sword art of his, there's one move, which he always thought to be the most formidable killer move in the entire sword art, called 'Jade Dragon Hanging Upside Down' where he would bring the sword swishing down from above with shear force. If he indeed launched this move against a student of Old Feng, then all the opponent had to do was to slice the long sword upward right next to his sword blade, and all his five fingers would have been sliced off, and the blood from his hand would splash everywhere like splashing ink. It's called the 'Splashing Blood Slicing Fingers Sword Art'! Ha-ha! Ha-ha!"

"Senior Master can predict with miraculous accuracy. I did defeat him on this move exactly as Senior Master has described. But I have no grudges against him; besides, Fourth Master had feasted me with great wines and treated me very kindly. So in regard to the five fingers, there's no need to slice them off. Ha-ha! Ha-ha!" Linghu Chong said.

By then, Mr. Paint's face looked as though someone had painted it scarlet and violet, and he was well worthy of the name "Mr. Paint". Except that his head is covered by a pillowcase, so no one could actually see his face.

"Bald-headed Third uses a Judge's Pen. His handwriting is no better than a three-year-old kid, yet he loves posing as a lover of culture and even claims that his Kung Fu contains conception from famous calligraphers. Little friend, I am sure you understand that combat with your enemy is an important matter that distinguishes between life and death. Even if one wrestles with all his strength, he is not guaranteed a triumph, where would he find such leisurely and carefree mood to be particular about the style of the inscription or script? Only when your opponent's Kung Fu is far inferior to that or yours, you might be able to tease him or play him, but if the two sides' Kung Fu skills are comparable and

you still try to write words with your Judge's Pen, you are only offering your own life with both hands to the mercy of your enemy."

"Senior Masters' words are very precise. The Third Master is a bit too casual when he fights others," Linghu Chong agreed.

When Mr. Bald-Brush first heard the man's comments, he was furious. But the more he thought about these words, the more he found them to be in the right. It was a lot of fun when he permeated calligraphy in his Judge Pen moves, but the power from his weapon did decrease dramatically after all. If it weren't because Linghu Chong held back, even ten Mr. Bald-Brush would have been slain easily. At that thought, he broke into cold sweat.

"To beat Bald-headed Third is as easy as a walkover," the man said with a laugh. "His Judge Pen Kung Fu used to be quite worthy, but he is too bigheaded and would rather add some kind of calligraphy in his Kung Fu. Humph, when elite fighters exchange moves, the outcome is determined from very minor aspects. Treating his own life as a joking matter, it is really a miracle in the Martial World that he was able to stay alive till today. Bald-headed Third, for the last ten years you just holed up and didn't go around the Martial world, didn't you?"

Mr. Bald-Brush let out a snort but didn't answer, when, in fact, a chill just shot down his spine. "He is absolutely right. If I had been wandering in the Martial World in the last ten years, there's no way I'd still be alive today," he thought inwardly.

"Second's Kung Fu with his Magnetic Iron Game Board is genuine talent, though," the man continued. "Once he starts his attack, each move becomes faster than the previous one, and the attack would swamp his opponent like a gust of blizzard or a sudden downpour. It is indeed not easy to withstand for ordinary martial artists. Little friend, tell me how you broke his attack?"

"Well, I certainly dare not to use the word 'break' here. Only that as soon as the fight broke out, I initiated my attack as well as the Second Master and was able to force him into defense," Linghu Chong replied.

“Excellent! How about the second move?” the man asked.

“With the second move, I used a forestall attack again, and Second Master took a defending stance again.”

“Excellent! Then how about the third move?”

“With the third move I was still attacking and he was still defending.”

“Incredible! In the old times, Black-White was indeed awe-inspiring in the Martial World. By then he used a regular Iron Board, and if anyone could withstand his three consecutive strikes, Black-White would spare his life. Later he changed his weapon to the Magnetic Iron Game Board and gained great advantage in his weapon, consequently, became even more capable. Little friend, you were actually able to force him into three consecutive defending moves, that’s excellent! So on the fourth move, how did he counterattack?”

On the fourth move, again, I attacked and Second Master defended.”

“Is Old Feng’s sword art really this brilliant? Even though to defeat Black-White is not difficult, you were actually able to force him into a defending stance again on the fourth move? Hmm, excellent! Excellent! On the fifth move, it must have been him who attacked?”

“On the fifth move, the situation remained the same.”

“Oh!” the man named Ren fell silent. Only after a long pause did he speak again. “After how many of your attacking moves Black-White was able to counterattack?”

“Um…well…I don’t remember how many,” Linghu Chong answered.

Mr. Black-White picked it up and said, “Senior Master, Young Hero Feng’s sword skills are so brilliant that from the beginning all the way to the end, I was not able to attack even once. After over forty moves, I knew I was no match for him so I stopped the match and admitted my defeat.” Only by then did he speak to the man named Ren and the tone of his words was unexpectedly respectful.

“Ah!” the man cried out loudly. “This is ridiculous! Although Feng Qingyang is an exceptional talent in the Sword Branch of the Huashan Sword School,

Huashan Sword Branch's sword art still has its limit. I'd never believe that someone from the Huashan School can attack Black-White with over forty moves and not let him return even a single blow!"

"Revered Mr. Ren is really flattering me, a junior! This Brother Feng here has well surpassed his teacher. The level of his sword skills has far exceeded the extent of Huashan Sword Branch. When we look around the entire Martial World, only someone like the Revered Mr. Ren, someone to be considered the mightiest fighter of our time, is capable of giving him some pointers," Mr. Black-White said.

"Mr. Huang-Zhong, Mr. Bald-Brush, and Mr. Paint all sounded very rude while Mr. Black-White spoke with the utmost esteem. But whether they were provoking words or flattering words, their intention remained the same, that is to let this Mr. Ren have a sword contest with me," Linghu Chong thought to himself.

"Humph! Your fawning stinks just the same!" the man reprimanded. "Huang-Zhong's moves and techniques are only on par with that of Black-White's, but his cultivation in inner strength is not bad at all. Little friend, is your inner strength stronger than him, too?"

"I had incurred prior injuries and had lost all my inner strength, that was why First Master's 'Seven-String Invisible Sword' had no effect on me at al," Linghu Chong replied.

The man burst into loud laughter. "That is very interesting. Little friend, I think I'd like to check out your sword art," he said.

"Senior Master, please don't fall for their scheme. The Four Playfellows of Jiangnan want to goad you into having the sword match. But they actually have ulterior motives," Linghu Chong urged.

"What ulterior motives?" the man asked.

"They made a wager with a friend of mine that if any one in the Plum Manor can defeat my sword art, then that friend of mine would have to lose a few things to them," Linghu Chong explained.

“Lose a few things? Um, I suppose they must be rare music scores, game manuals, or probably authentic calligraphy books or paintings from ancient times,” the man said.

“Senior Master can foresee with divine accuracy!” Linghu Chong said.

“I only want to see your sword art; we are not having a real fight. Besides, who said I’d be able to beat you for sure?”

“It’s practically certain that Senior Master would prevail over me. But we must ask the four Manor Masters to give their words on one condition,” Linghu Chong said.

“What condition?” the man asked.

“If Senior Masters defeats the long sword in my hand and win those several treasures for them, the four Manor Masters must open the cell door and let Senior Master leave this place,” Linghu Chong explained.

“Little friend has a very fantastic idea. Did Feng Qingyang teach you that?” the man grinned.

“Venerable Grandmaster Feng has no idea that Senior Master is imprisoned here. And I had absolutely no clue about it as well,” Linghu Chong said.

“Young Hero Feng,” Mr. Black-White suddenly called out. “What is the name of this Revered Mr. Ren? What nickname has he gained from fellow martial masters in the Martial World? Which school was he the Head Master of? Why is he locked up here? Did the Venerable Grandmaster Feng tell you anything about it?”

Facing these four sudden questions from Mr. Black-White, Linghu Chong found himself tongue-tied. Before when Linghu Chong had attacked forty or so moves in quick successions, Mr. Black-White had been able to ward them of with forty or so defending moves. But now when Mr. Black-White suddenly asked him four questions in quick successions as though he was attacking with four moves, Linghu Chong couldn’t even fend off any one of them. After some indistinct falters, he said, “Well, I haven’t heard any of those from Grandmaster

Feng. I…I really don't know the answers to those."

"Right! I bet you don't have a clue," Mr. Paint joined in. "If you had known the cause here, you wouldn't have wanted us to release him. If this man gets to leave this place, then the entire Martial World would have been turned upside down. Countless of people would die under his hands and there will never be another peaceful day in the entire Martial World."

"That's correct!" the man guffawed. "No matter how daring the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan are, they'd never have the guts to let me out of the prison cell. Besides, they are only following orders to watch over this place, nothing more than four puny prison guards. How could they have the authority to release me? Little friend, this request of yours has really elevated their status too much!"

Linghu Chong kept his silence, thinking, "I had the least bit of idea about any of these implications. No wonder only a few sentence into it, I've already given myself away."

"Brother Feng," Mr. Huang-Zhong said, "when you saw how gloomy and damp the dungeon is, naturally you sympathized with this Mr. Ren, therefore, felt resentment toward us four brothers. That only shows the errantry in your heart, and I don't blame you. But did you know that if this Mr. Ren returned to the Martial World, just in your Huashan School, at least half of your people would have been wiped out. Mr. Ren, am I correct on that?"

"You are correct! Is Huashan School's Head Master still Yue Buqun? He is a complete hypocrite. Too bad at first I was too busy, and then fell for a secret plot afterwards, otherwise, I would have tore his hypocritical mask off a long time again," the man scoffed.

Linghu Chong felt big shock in his heart. Though his Master expelled him from the Huashan School and also proclaimed to the entire world, making him the public enemy of all orthodox schools in the Martial World, he always recalled with emotion the kindness his Master and Master-Wife had shown him bringing him up and treating him like their own son. When he heard the man

named Ren fouled and insulted his Master, he couldn't help but roar, "Shut up! My Mas…." But he immediately swallowed the rest of the word down, remembering that when Xiang Wentian brought him to the Plum Manor, he had been introduced as the Uncle-Master of his Master. Before knowing whether these people were good or evil, it would have been unwise to reveal the truth.

The man named Ren, of course, did not know the true meaning behind Linghu Chong's roar. While laughing loudly, he continued, "Within the Huashan School, there are of course people I think much of. Reverend Feng is one; you, little friend, is another. And there is another junior of yours called something like 'Jade Maiden of Huashan' Ning…Ning something. Oh, I got it. Her name is Ning Zhongze. That little girl is actually straightforward and heroic. She is a talent. What a pity it is that she had to marry that Yue Buqun like a beautiful flower stuck on a pile of cow dung."

Linghu Chong didn't know whether to laugh or to cry when he heard the man referring to his Master-Wife as a "little girl," so he didn't respond. At least he had favorable comment for Master-Wife and called her a talent.

"Little friend, what's your name?" the man asked.

"My surname is Feng, and my first name is Er-Zhong," Linghu Chong replied.

"Anyone with the surname Feng in the Huashan School can't be bad. Come in here. Let me check out Reverent Feng's sword art," the man said. He had been referring to Feng Qingyang as "Old Feng" at first, but then changed it to "Reverent Feng" later. He must have been quite pleased with the way Linghu Chong talked and turned courteous toward Feng Qingyang in his words.

Linghu Chong's curiosity had been growing constantly for a good while and was very eager to meet this man, to take a look at how he looked and to find out how great his Kung Fu was.

"My shallow sword art is only good for bluffing some people on the outside. But in front of Senior Master, it is nothing more than a laughing matter. But the Revered Mr. Ren is a man with exceptional abilities. Since I am already here, how can I not pay a visit?" he said respectfully.

Mr. Paint moved closer and then whispered to his ears, “Brother Feng, this man’s Kung Fu is very bizarre, and the methods he employs are also very sinister. Be very careful. If anything doesn’t feel right for you, come back out immediately.” His voice was very low, but the caring and concern obviously came from complete sincerity.

“Fourth Master is treating me like a true friend!” Linghu Chong thought inwardly. “I ridiculed him with my words just a moment ago. Not only didn’t he bear grudges at all, on the contrary, he sincerely cared for my safety.” At that thought, secretly, he couldn’t help but feel ashamed.

“Come in! Come in! What are they talking about on the outside, talking so furtively? Little friend, the Four Clowns of the Jiangnan are no good apples. All they want is to have you fall for their trick. Nothing good will come out of their mouths. Don’t trust a word from them,” the man said loudly.

Linghu Chong found himself wavering, not sure which side he should trust and which side he should help. Mr. Huang-Zhong took out another key from his chest pocket and then turned it several times after inserting it into the keyhole on the iron-door. Linghu Chong had thought that after he unlocked the door, he would go ahead and push the iron-door open, but quite to his surprise, Mr. Huang-Zhong stepped back and Mr. Black-White stepped forward, who also took out a key from his own chest pocket, inserted the key into the keyhole, and then turned a few times. After him, Mr. Bald-Brush and Mr. Paint each took out his key and turned the key in the keyhole respectively.

Linghu Chong suddenly realized, “This Senior Master’s status must have been very prestigious. The four Manor Masters each is holding a separate key and it takes all four keys combined to be able to open the iron-door. The Four Playfellows of Jiangnan are as intimate as real brothers, and the four of them are almost like one unity. How come they don’t even trust each other?” Then he thought, “A moment ago, that Senior Master said that the Four Playfellows of Jiangnan are only acting under orders like prison guards. They have no authority to release him at all. Maybe it was the same person who appointed them the guard duty who ordered them to each holds a separate key. The turning

sounds of the keys were strident and unsmooth, obviously the lock was covered with rust and it has been a long time since the iron-door was last opened."

After Mr. Paint turned his key in the keyhole, he grasped onto the door handle, shook it a few times, and then pushed hard. Amid the loud scrunching sounds, the iron-door opened for a few inches inward. As soon as the door opened, Mr. Paint leapt backward. Mr. Huang-Zhong and the other two Manor Masters also leapt back many feet. Instinctively, Linghu Chong also took a few steps back.

"Little friend, they are afraid of me, but why would you be?" the man laughed loudly.

"Right!" Linghu Chong answered and then stepped forward. Reaching his hand out, he pushed on the iron-door. The hinges on the door were so rusted that he pushed very hard and only was able to open the door two feet wide. Immediately, a strong stale smell filled his nostrils.

Mr. Paint stepped forward and then handed him two wooden swords. Linghu Chong took the wooden swords and held them tightly with his left hand.

"Brother Feng, take an oil lamp with you," Mr. Bald-Brush suggested, taking an oil lamp off the wall.

Linghu Chong took the oil lamp with his right hand and then entered the room. The prison cell was about ten-foot long and ten foot wide. A narrow and long bed lay next to a wall, on which sat a man. Long whiskers and mast aches covered the man's face, making it impossible to see his look. The long beard under his chin almost reached his waist. But his hair, beard, and eyebrows were jet black without even a grain of grey.

"It is so fortunate of me to be able to meet the Senior Master Ren today. I hope I'll be getting many good advice from you," Linghu Chong bowed.

"Don't be modest. I'll have to thank you for coming here to dispel my loneliness," the man grinned.

"You flatter me. Should I put the oil lamp on the bed?" Linghu Chong asked.

“Fine!” the man answered but didn’t reach out to get the lamp.

“This prison cell is too small to have a sword fight here?” Linghu Chong thought to himself.

He walked next to the bed and set the oil lamp down. Expediently, he gently tucked the paper ball and the hard object inside into the man’s palm. The man was slightly taken aback but still took the paper ball as he asked in a loud voice, “Hey, you four chaps! Are you coming in to watch?”

“The space is too limited. There’s no room,” Mr. Huang-Zhong replied.

“Suit yourself! Little friend, shut the door,” ” the man said.

“Yes,” Linghu Chong answered and then shut the cell door.

The man stood up and immediately a series of slight clanking sounds clanged from around his body as though many thin steel chains were clanking against each other. Reaching out with his right hand, he took a wooden sword from Linghu Chong and heaved a long sigh.

“I have not touched a weapon for over ten years. I wonder if I still remember the sword arts I learned many years back.”

Linghu Chong noticed a steel circle around his wrist, and a steel chain attached to it connected all the way to the wall behind him. Another glance quickly confirmed that there were also steel chains shackling the man’s other hand and both of his ankles to the wall behind him. Then the four walls grabbed his attention. Under the dim light from the oil lamp, they shined in dark green – turned out the four walls were all made of pure steel. He figured that the chains and shackles on the man’s wrists and ankles must have been made of pure steel, or else, chains this thin wouldn’t have been able to restrain a top notch Kung Fu master like him.

The man gave the wood sword a swing. The swing came from above to below and the sword merely moved about two feet in the air, but suddenly loud buzzes echoed in the small room.

“Senior Master, what incredible strength!” Linghu Chong praised.

The man turned around, and Linghu Chong could vaguely see that he opened the paper ball, saw the hard object wrapped inside, and began reading the writings on the paper. Taking a step backward, Linghu Chong intentionally blocked the square hole on the iron-door with his head, so no one from the outside could see what the man was doing. The man's body trembled slightly as though the writings on the paper had greatly agitated him, and the steel chains clanged again and again. But only moments later, he had already turned around, and sharp stares shot out of his eyes.

"Little friend, although my hands cannot move freely, it is not necessarily true that I cannot win over you!"

"As a young and green junior, I, of course, is no rival for Senior Master," Linghu Chong said.

"You attacked Black-White over forty moves in succession and didn't give him any chance to launch his counterattack. You want to give me try?" the man demanded.

"Please forgive my audacity!" Linghu Chong replied and then thrust his sword at that man. The move he used was none other than the exact same first move he had used in the match against Mr. Black-White.

"Excellent!" the man commended and thrust his wooden sword at Linghu Chong's left chest at an angle. It was a defending move that carried strong offence, and an offence move backed by strong defense at the same time, a swift and fierce sword move indeed.

Mr. Black-White watched the fight through the square shaped hole on the iron-door. As soon as he saw this move, he couldn't help but shout, "Brilliant move!"

"Today is you four chaps' lucky day. I am going to really widen your view now," the man chortled.

By then, Linghu Chong's second sword attack had arrived. The man swung his wooden sword outward and pointed it at Linghu Chong's right shoulder, another smart move that had both strong defense and strong offense. Linghu

Chong's heart thumped. It felt as though there was not a single flaw in the man's move that he could explorer to thrust forward and attack the opponent's vital points. Having no alternative, he leveled his own sword in a block, tilting his sword tip, implying a possible attack toward the opponent's lower stomach, a defending move that also carried much offense.

"Very clever move!" the man smiled, retracting his sword and swept it to the side.

The two of them went back and forth, and within just a few moments had already exchanged twenty moves or so. But during the entire course, the two wooden swords never even touched each other. The man's sword moves had such complicated variations and movements; ever since Linghu Chong had learned the "Dugu Nine Swords," he had never run into an opponent so formidable and powerful. It wasn't that his opponent's sword moves were void of flaws, but because the moves fluctuated so unpredictably he simply couldn't attack the flaw or crack within. But he sincerely followed the gist in Feng Qingyang's teaching, which was to "conquer a move with no move," and shifted his moves at will. Although the "Sword-Breaking Stance" was only one stance in the "Dugu Nine Swords," it was a combination of the essentials in all the sword arts of various schools and factions in the world. So even though it was "no move," when in fact it built its foundation on all the moves in all sword arts.

The man also noticed that Linghu Chong's new sword moves emerged one after another, and every change seemed completed new to him. Relying on his abundant experience and profound Kung Fu skills, he was able to resolve them one after another, but after over forty moves, he could already feel a slight sluggishness in his sword movement. Slowly, he attached more and more inner strength onto his wooden sword, and every swing of his sword seemed to have created vague echoes of gust and thunder.

But no matter how resourceful the opponent's inner strength was, when those moves met the profound and subtle sword techniques of the "Dugu Nine Swords," they all came to nothing. Only that the man's outstanding prowess in inner strength and his superb ingeniousness in sword techniques had become

simply inseparable from each other. Several times the man had already forced Linghu Chong into extremities, where Linghu Chong should have had no choice but to throw down his sword and submit, but Linghu Chong would always be able to suddenly come up with some bizarre moves, which not only rescue himself out of the dead-end position, but also enable him to use the opportunity to launch his counterblow. The brilliance of these moves was simply unimaginably queer.

Mr. Huang-Zhong and the rest three Manor Masters crowded over the iron door and watched through the square-shaped hole. The hole was so small that there was only space for two persons to watch at the same time, and even with the two persons watching, one had to watch only with his left eye while the other one watched only with his right eye. So two of them would watch for a while before moving aside to let the other two watch for the next while.

At the beginning, the four of them gasped in admiration when they watched the marvelous sword moves exchanged between the man and Linghu Chong, but soon afterwards, they could no long understand the brilliance in the two's sword moves. Sometimes after Mr. Huang-Zhong saw a move, he had to ponder upon the subtlety within the move with all his might. Only after a long contemplation was he able to comprehend. But by then, the two men inside had already exchanged another dozen moves, and he pretty much had been turning a blind eye on how those next dozen moves had panned out. After he finally got over the initial amazement, he couldn't help but wonder.

"It turned out that Brother Feng's sword skills have reached such an extreme. When he fought me earlier, he probably only utilized thirty or forty percent of his true skills. I had thought that my 'Seven-String Invisible Sword' from my zither failed to subdue him only because he had no inner strength. But even if he does have resourceful of inner strength, my "Invisible Sword" wouldn't have had any impact just the same. All he had to do was to launch three quick attacking moves, and I would have no choice but to drop my zither and admit defeat. If it had been a fight for survival, he could have easily blinded my eyes with the jade flute in his first move."

Mr. Huang-Zhong, of course, had no idea that he had really overrated Linghu Chong's sword skills. The "Dugu Nine Swords" was a Kung Fu that turned more powerful when the opponent was stronger. If the opponent were not adequate, then the brilliant techniques in the "Dugu Nine Swords" would not have been applicable. The man Linghu Chong was fighting today was a world-shaking figure in the entire Martial World. The aptitude of his Kung Fu had reached a level that's well out of people's imagination. Only with the stimulation from his extraordinary Kung Fu, were the many profound and subtle aspects of the "Dugu Nine Swords" able to make the most revealing performance. Even if Dugu Seeking-A-Loss could come back to life, or if Feng Qingyang had come himself, they would have found great joy fighting such a capable opponent. To successfully use the "Dugu Nine Swords" relied on not only a very good understanding of the sword techniques and variations, but also the intelligence of the practitioner, where the second part played even a bigger part. Once the practitioner had reached a stage where he could extend at will with no restraints and no boundaries, then the more intelligent the practitioner was, the more brilliant the sword art would become, and to him, each sword contest would have been like a poet composing a wonderful poem after following his greatest inspirations.

After another forty moves or so, Linghu Chong found himself fighting with greater and greater facility. Many of the clever knacks he used were ones that even Fang Qingyang had never mentioned before. On encountering the brilliant sword moves from his opponent, the "Dugu Nine Swords" spontaneously originated corresponding moves to counter. At the moment fear had been completely cleared off his mind, or in another word, he had been concentrating wholeheartedly in the art of sword, having no leisure for any feeling of fear or delight on his mind. That man changed into eight different styles of advanced sword arts in succession, some uninterrupted and unbroken, some delicate and swift, some others firm and forceful, but regardless of how he changed his moves, Linghu Chong was able to handle the with ease, as though these eight sword arts were ones he had been trained to spar against ever since he was young.

The man suddenly swung his sword in a block and yelled out loud, “Little friend, who on earth taught you your sword art? I don’t think Reverend Feng has that capability.”

Linghu Chong was slightly surprised. “If this weren’t taught by Reverend Feng, who else could have it been?” he uttered.

“That is true! Why don’t you try this sword form of mine?” the man demanded.

He let out a long howl and suddenly brought his wooden sword swishing down from above. Linghu Chong thrust out in a tilted angle and forced him to withdraw his attack to block. The man roared again and again as though he had gone completely mad. The more pressing his roars were, the faster his attacks became. Linghu Chong didn’t find anything peculiar about this sword form, but each of the thundering roars made his ears buzz uncomfortably and made him feel annoyed and perplexed. He tried to hold his calm with difficulty and continued breaking the opponent’s attacks, but suddenly, the man let out an earth-shattering and heaven-battering howl. Linghu Chong felt a loud ring in his ear as though his eardrums had been shattered by the thunderous shock. A strong dizziness quickly consumed him and before he knew it, he had collapsed to the floor and lost his consciousness.

Notes

[←1]

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.

[←2]

Just want to clarify that the character Feng here is a different one from the Feng in Feng Qingyang's name.

[←3]

Three religions: Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. Nine schools of thought: the Confucians, the Taoists, the Yin-Yang, the Legalists, the Logicians, the Mohists, the Political Strategists, the Eclectics, and the Agriculturists.

[←4]

A phrase used to include all aspects of weaponry. The eighteen types of weaponry are: Saber, spear, sword, halberd, axe, battle-axe, hook, fork, whip, mace, hammer, talon, trident-halberd, cudgel, long-handled spear, short cudgel, stick, and meteor hammer.

[←5]

According to Chinese Medical Theory, these are main and collateral channels, regarded as a network of passages, through which vital energy circulates and along which the acupuncture points are distributed.

[←6]

Tai Chi is really a term used by ancient Chinese philosophers to refer to the infinite universe.

[←7]

Heaven Drum (Tian-Gu), Jade Honey (Yu-Jiang), Corona Pool (Hua-Chi), and Golden Beam (Jin-Liang) are four different major acupuncture points on a human body.

[←8]

Bluffing the enemy by opening the gates of a weakly defended city. Presenting a bold front to conceal a weak defense. Zhu Geliang and Sima Yi were both real historical figures in ancient China. See their story in Romance of the Three Kingdoms.

[←9]

Di Xiu’s Master is an apprentice brother of Zuo Lengchan, the Head Master of Songshan Sword School, that’s why Di referred to Zuo as Head Uncle-Master.

[←10]

Once a person’s Mute Point is sealed, he will temporarily lose the ability to speak.

[←11]

An intimate way of calling Yilin.

[←12]

When one becomes a Buddhist monk, he will no longer be referred to using his real name. He will get a name in the Buddhist ‘s order and he is supposed to forget his real name as part of the Four Emptiness Doctrine.

[←13]

The title “Great Master” is a respectful way of calling a member of the Buddhist order.

[←14]

A style of Chinese calligraphy, often used on seals.

[←15]

These names of majors and minors are used in ancient Chinese musical theories.

[←16]

Pulse checking was a standard procedure performed by doctors in ancient China. By checking the patient's pulse, the doctor would be able to find out what might have gone wrong with the patient.

[←17]

Huang Di was a legendary character in the very ancient times (before any of the dynasties). He was considered the very ancestor of all Chinese people.

[←18]

Yue Fei, also named Yue Pengju, was one of the most legendary national heroes in Chinese history. He was the general in the Northern Song dynasty in charge of the Chinese army that defended Northern Song government against the Jin Empire’s invading army.

[←19]

Jin Wushu was the general in charge of the Jin Empire’s invading army.

[←20]

Yang Zai-Xing was a general under the command of General Yue Fei. He died a tragic death when he took a wrong path and found himself right in the middle of the enemy's trap. He was shot dead by the Jin army's many archers.

[←21]

Golden Blade Grandpa Yang is a figure from the folklore about the Yang Family Corp. Golden Blade Grandpa Yang was a general for the Northern Song dynasty. His army was surrounded by the Liao Empire's army. He refused to surrender and committed suicide. He had seven sons, and all seven sons became generals in the Northern Song army and fought the Liao Empire's invading army.

[←22]

Yang the Sixth was the sixth son of Golden Blade Grandpa Yang. He became the commander in chief for the Northern Song army. He was also the only heir of Golden Blade Grandpa Yang that lived long enough to have children to carry the Yang Family's name down the line.

[←23]

Yang the Seventh was the seventh son of Golden Blade Grandpa Yang. He was the best fighter among the seven sons, but died in a young age.

[←24]

Yang Zongbao was the son of Yang the Sixth. He was also a general of the Northern Song army.

[←25]

Yang Wenguang was the son of Yang Zongbao. He fought in the Northern Song army also.

[←26]

In Chinese, Xing means happy.

[←27]

Fen-Wine is a famous type of wine that is made in Fenyang, Shan-Xi (first intonation) Province. Even today, Fen-Wine remains one of the best wine brands in China.

[←28]

The same Shao-Wine Tian Boguang mentioned in Chapter 9.

[←29]

In Chinese, “Zu Zong” means ancestor.

[←30]

Zu Di was a real historic figure in the Han Dynasty. When he was still young, he got up at the first crow of a cock every morning to train in sword arts. Later his training paid off and he became a famous general, and the story of the morning training also became famous.

[←31]

This is quoted from Li Bai's poem: *Written as a Guest*. Li Bai is the most famous poet in the Tang Dynasty. If you still remember, his name was mentioned in Chapter 9. The poem described the poet's deep gratitude toward the host. The entire poem goes like this: Tulip leaves soaked the wonderful wine of Lanling, Jade Cups bring about the light of amber.

If only the host can get the guest drunk, Everywhere becomes hometown .

[←32]

Pipa is an ancient Chinese music instrument.

[←33]

This is quoted from Wang Han's poem: *Poem of Liangzhou*. Wang Han is a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty. This poem describes the feelings of soldiers before going to battles. The entire poem goes like this: Wonderful Grape Wine filled the Luminous Cups; I want to drink but the sound of Pipa is already calling me to my horseback.

If I get drunk and lie down on the battlefield, laugh me not.

From the many wars, how many soldiers can actually make it back?

[←34]

This is quoted from Yue Fei's poem: *Red River Poem* (where Red River is the name of a poem style). Yue Fei was a legendary general who fought the Huns' invading army and defended the Song Dynasty. He was not only a great hero, but also a great poet, and Red River Poem is the most well known poem of his. Because of the length of the poem, I will not include the entire poem here.

[←35]

Xia Dynasty is the first dynasty in Chinese history. King Yu was very famous for his great achievement in flood-control.

[←36]

Jue is an ancient wine vessel with three legs and a loop handle.

[←37]

The reason Zu Qianqiu said so is because in the Northern Song Dynasty, China had a strong government and defeated many foreign invasions. During the Southern Song Dynasty, the government's power declined more and more and China lost many battles with the foreign invaders. Then at the end of the Southern Song Dynasty, the Mongolian army invaded and took over China and founded the Yuan Dynasty. The Han Chinese overthrown the Mongolian ruler at the end of the Yuan Dynasty and started the Ming Dynasty.

[←38]

Bai Juyi is a famous poet in the Tang Dynasty. This poem illustrated the beautiful spring scenery of the city of Hangzhou. Because of the length of the poem, I will not include the entire poem here.

[←39]

Legend said that toward the end of the Qin Dynasty, Liu Bang was a Pavilion Officer (the lowest ranking official at the time), and he was ordered to escort laborers to Mount Li. But during the trip, many of the laborers died because of the harsh conditions, so Liu Bang decided to let all the escorted laborers flee for life. Only about ten men decided to stay and follow him. That night, Liu Bang drank too much and became drunk. He sent one man ahead of the group to check the road, and that man returned with a report that a giant snake had blocked the road. In the drunkenness, Liu Bang feared nothing so he ran forward and slain the giant white snake to clear the way. Later he fell asleep a little further down the road. An old woman began crying at where he slain the snake. People asked her why she cried, and the old woman answered that someone had killed her son. People then asked her how her son was killed. She answered that her son was the son of the White Heaven and had transformed into the white snake, and was killed by the son of the Red Heaven. Later Liu Bang heard the story and his confidence was boosted dramatically, that was when he decided to start a rebellion army to overthrow the current emperor. (Emperors call themselves sons of the Heaven to establish the divine status.)

[←40]

Hongman is in Shanxi province. In 206 B.C., Liu Bang declared himself the Lord of Hanzhong. Xiang Yu, Liu Bang's main rivalry, led his army and came to Hongman, ready to eliminate Liu Bang's army. His advisor Fan Zeng suggested Xiang to set up a banquet and invite Liu Bang so they could assassinate him at the banquet. At the time, Liu Bang's army was no match for Xiang Yu's army, so he had to come to the banquet to apologize to Xiang. Only Liu Bang and his advisor, Zhang Liang, were allowed into the banquet. During the banquet, Xiang's advisor Fan Zeng ordered Xiang Zhuang, Xiang Yu's general, to perform a sword dance to entertain the guests and then assassinate Liu in the sword dance when he had a chance. Liu Bang's advisor Zhang Liang immediately walked out of the tent and informed Liu's general, Fan Kuai, who in turn, immediately ran into the tent and interrupted the banquet. Xiang Yu offered Fan some meat, which Fan ate using his shield as the plate. Xiang Yu then offered Fan some wine, which Fan drank using a big ladler. Xiang Yu liked the heroic spirit shown by Fan and called off Xiang Zhuang, the assassin. Later Liu Bang pretended to use the restroom and fled. By risking his own life, Fan Kuai saved Liu Bang's life. Liu Bang eventually destroyed Xiang Yu's army and then founded Han Dynasty.

[←41]

If you still remember from chapter 1, Zhong Kui was half-god half-human in Chinese mythology and had the special power to drive evil spirits away.

[←42]

The needle hat and the long narrow white banner are both objects used in funerals in ancient times.

[←43]

In Chinese, Zu means ancestor. Zu Qianqiu explained this when he first introduced himself in chapter 14.

[←44]

The Bu in the name Yue Buqun means no in Chinese.

[←45]

This idiom came from the story of “The Romance of the Three Kingdoms.” When Liu Bei borrowed the city of Jinzhou as his temporary base, he never intended to return it.

[←46]

In Chinese, Ji Wushi means out of one’s wits.

[←47]

Han is the main nationality in China and account for 92% of the entire Chinese population. In the ancient time, minorities were always looked down upon somewhat because Han people considered themselves better civilized and educated.

[←48]

Yunnan is a province in the Southwest China that borders Vietnam and Burma.

[←49]

Miao is one of the minority nationalities in China.

[←50]

In ancient China, it was very inappropriate for females to expose their arms or legs to anyone, except their husbands.

[←51]

In Chinese myths, there was a god (with the appearance of a boy) named Ne Zha who could turn into a creature with three heads and six arms when he got into battles, and thus triple the fighting power.

[←52]

According to Eastern Medicine, it takes hundreds of years to for a ginseng to grow into the shape of a human body, and once it grows into the shape of a human body, its nutrition value becomes extraordinary or even magical.

[←53]

The Kunlun School is a famous martial arts school headquartered on Mount Kunlun. Mount Kunlun is a large mountain in the Xinjiang Province, a province in the northwest region of China bordering the many countries that used to be members of the former USSR.

[←54]

In Buddhist theory, the human body is only considered a vessel of the human soul. Once the soul leaves the body, the body becomes worthless.

[←55]

"Why use a cattle knife to kill the chicken" is a Chinese idiom. It originated from the book *The Analects of Confucius*. According to the book, Confucius traveled to Wu Chang and heard the sound of string instrument and heard the singing. Surprised that his student Zi You had succeeded in transforming the militant temperament of the local people and turned them into music loving people. The great sage said smilingly, "Why use a cattle knife to kill the chicken?" Today this idiom is used to imply that a person of great talent is used for a job of little importance. It's similar to the English idiom "break a butterfly on the wheel."

[←56]

It was recorded in the story *Legend of Fan Kuai* (yes, this is the same Fan Kuai we talked about in Chapter 14) in *The Book of Han* (a famous history book written in the Han Dynasty by Ban Gu) that “Kuai, born in the county of Pei, and made a living by butchering dogs.”

[←57]

Jade Emperor is the Supreme Deity of Taoism. He is the ultimate ruler of the entire heaven.

[←58]

It is tradition for a Buddhist monk to burn scars on his head using incense sticks to show his sincerity.

[←59]

Buddhists believe that if one persists in matters of the mortal world, he will not be able to attain the true meaning of Buddhism. But while mortal life is only a transient phase of a true Buddhist's incarnation, he should work wholeheartedly in releasing people in the mortal world from pain and sufferings.

[←60]

Bodhidharma (also known as Pu Tai Ta Mo in Sanskrit and Daruma Daishi in Japanese) was an Enlightened Buddhist Master who is credited with reviving Buddhism in China and founding martial arts. Bodhidharma began his life as a royal prince in Southern India in the Sardilli family in 482 A.D. In the midst of his education and training to continue in his father's footsteps as king, Bodhidharma encountered the Buddha's teachings. He immediately saw the truth in Lord Buddha's words and decided to give up his esteemed position and inheritance to study with the famous Buddhist teacher Prajnatara. Bodhidharma rapidly progressed in his Buddhist studies, and in time, Prajnatara sent Bodhidharma to China, where Buddhism had begun to die out, to introduce the Sarvastivada sect Buddhist teachings to the Chinese. Bodhidharma arrived in China after a brutal trek over Tibet's Himalayan Mountains surviving both the extreme elements and treacherous bandits. Upon arrival in China, the Emperor Wu Di, a devout Buddhist himself, requested an audience with Bodhidharma. During their initial meeting, Wu Di asked Bodhidharma what merit he had achieved for all of his good deeds. Bodhidharma informed him that he had accrued none whatsoever. Bodhidharma was subsequently unable to convince Wu Di of the value of the teachings he had brought from India. Bodhidharma then set out for Luoyang, crossed the Yangtze River on a leaf, and climbed Bear's Ear Mountain in the Songshan Mountain range where the Shaolin Temple was located. He meditated there in a small cave for nine years. Bodhidharma, in true Mahayana spirit, was moved to pity when he saw the terrible physical condition of the monks of the Shaolin Temple. The monks had practiced long-term meditation retreats, which made them spiritually strong but physically weak. He also noted that this meditation method caused sleepiness among the monks. Likening them to the young Shakyamuni, who almost died from practicing asceticism, he informed the monks that he would teach their bodies and their minds the Buddha's dharma through a two-part program of meditation and physical training. Bodhidharma created an exercise program for the monks, which involved physical techniques that were efficient, strengthened the body, and

eventually, could be used practically in self-defense. When Bodhidharma instituted these practices, his primary concern was to make the monks physically strong enough to withstand both their isolated lifestyle and the deceptively demanding training that meditation requires. It turned out that the techniques served a dual purpose as a very efficient fighting system, which evolved into a martial arts style called Shaolin Kung Fu. Martial arts training helped the monks to defend themselves against invading warlords and bandits. Bodhidharma taught that martial arts should be used for self-defense, and never to hurt or injure needlessly. In fact, it is one of the oldest Shaolin axioms that “one who engages in combat has already lost the battle.” Bodhidharma, a member of the Indian Kshatriya warrior class and a master of staff fighting, developed a system of 18 dynamic tension exercises. These movements found their way into print in 550 A.D. as the Yi Jin Jing, or Tendon Altering Sutra. We know this system today as the Luohan (Priest-Scholar) 18 Hand Movements, the basis of Shaolin Temple Boxing and the Shaolin Arts.

[←61]

It is tradition to attach small bells to a horse in China. The pleasant ringing of the bells also are useful as signals to inform pedestrians about the coming of the running horse so they would have plenty of time to move out of the way.

[←62]

A type of dart that shoots out from one’s sleeves.

[←63]

This idiom came from a story recorded in the book Shi Ji (Historical Records) by Sima Qian: In the battle with the army of Zhao, Han general Han Xin ordered his troops to form a battling formation with their backs to the river. With a mighty Zhao army in front of them and no way to retreat to behind their backs, the Han soldiers had no choice but to conquer or die. Even though the Zhao army was much larger than the Han army, the Han soldiers fought with all their might and crushed the Zhao army. This is one of the most famous battles in Chinese history. Later people use this idiom to describe one's determination to conquer or fight to death.

[←64]

Gold cast into the shape of leaves for the convenience of travelers.

[←65]

The world’s most ancient man-made waterway, China’s Grand Canal, a system still in use up to the 21st Century, was built in the Sui Dynasty in 606 AD, which linked the Yangtze, Yellow and Huai rivers, requiring the conscription of up to two million workers.

[←66]

South of the lower reaches of the Yangtze River.

[←67]

Turfan is a famous city in the Xinjiang Autonomous Region. It’s very famous for its high temperature in the summer. And because of the special climate, the city produces world-renowned Hami melons and grapes. The famous Mountain of Blaze descried in the novel Journey to the West is located right next to the city of Turfan.

[←68]

Great Master Xuan-Zang, or Tang Seng (Monk from Tang Dynasty), journeyed all the way to India in order to retrieve the true Buddhist Scriptures. Later, his story was written into the famous novel, Journey to the West.

[←69]

A Chinese game for two, played with black and white counters on a board that is ruled with 19 vertical and 19 horizontal lines. You can visit this web page by Mindy McAdams for more information about the game of Go.

[←70]

Legend has it that in the Jin Dynasty, there was a young woodman named Wang Zhi. One day when he went up the mountain to chop woods as usual, he saw two old men playing a game of Go, so he set his axe aside and watched by the side. By the time the game was over and the two old men had left, he decided to gather his axe and get on with his work. That was when he found out that the helve of his axe had decayed completely. Very baffled, he went down the mountain, only to find out that five hundred years had passed and everybody he had known had all passed away. Because this story was so wide spread that people of the later generations gave the game of Go a nickname: Decayed Helve.

[←71]

Legend has it that in the Northern Song Dynasty, Liu Zhongpu, the National Champion in the game of Go, played a game of Go with a young girl in a teahouse. Liu's white pieces took all the upper hands in the game. Very pleased with himself, Liu made no effort of concealing his arrogance, so the young girl excused herself and soon returned with a granny, who picked up where the young girl had left off in the game of Go. With much ease, the granny placed her pieces on the board quickly and completely turned the game around, knocking Liu off his feet. The utmost anxiety and desperation hit Liu hard and he began spitting up blood from the frustration. Only after he had lost the game did he realize that the young girl and the granny were not human but celestial beings.

[←72]

Legend has it that when Xuan-Zong, the emperor of Tang, fled to Szechwan because of An Lushan's revolt. Wang Jixin, his royal champion of Go, also followed. And along the way, one day, Wang Jixin put up for the night under the eave of an old farmer granny's house, when he heard the bed talk between the old granny and her daughter-in-law. Turned out they were playing a game of Go while lying on bed in the dark simply by spelling out their moves. Greatly shaken by the brilliant moves, Wang Jixin memorized all the moves in the game quietly. The next morning when he tried to consult the old granny and her daughter-in-law, he found out that the house was actually an abandoned house with no one living in it. He suspected that the old granny and her daughter-in-law were actually fairy foxes who had assumed human shape.

[←73]

Confucius looked on the game of Go as a waste of time, thus criticized it as unorthodox school.

[←74]

These are terms in the game of Go. Please see this web page for more information.

[←75]

See the painting here.

[←76]

A highly cursive script style in Chinese calligraphy (a subset of Grass Style calligraphy) executed with strokes flowing together. Not only the style writing is free and easy, but also fast.

[←77]

The style of calligraphy for inscriptions on drum-shaped stone blocks of the Warring States Period (475-221 B.C.)

[←78]

Han Yu, a famous poet, writer, and philosopher of the Tang Dynasty.

[←79]

See the calligraphy book here.

[←80]

Yan Zhenqing (709-785AD) is a famous calligraphy artist during the Tang Dynasty who created the Yan Style of Chinese Calligraphy.

[←81]

Six Directions: The six cardinal directions: front, back, left, right, above, and below, meaning all under heaven.

[←82]

Nine Fields: North, South, East, West, Middle, Northwest, Northeast, Southwest, Southeast, meaning the world.

[←83]

A famous general during the Three Kingdoms period. See *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* for the story of Zhang Fei.

[←84]

Huai Su was another very famous Calligraphy Artist in Chinese history. See the calligraphy book here.

[←85]

A special term in the game of Go. Please see this web page for more information.

[←86]

The first temperament of the “Twelve Temperaments” used in ancient music. Huang-Zhong is the lowest out of the twelve and all other temperaments are derived from it.

[←87]

Chinese idiom. For a frog living at the bottom of a well, because the frog could only see the sky in the shape of the opening of the well, so the frog thought that the sky must have been only as big as the opening of the well. The idiom is used to depict a man of ignorance and with a very limited outlook,

[←88]

The character “Feng” stands for wind in Chinese.