

Three days later. Dawn.

Bai Xiaochun's eyes opened at sunrise. He took a deep breath, and a serious expression could be seen on his face. This was his first time taking part in a competition like this. His fight early on with Xu Baocai actually didn't really count as much of a battle. However, now that he was going to participate in Fragrant Cloud Peak's Outer Sect competition, he would be truly fighting against his fellow sect members. He slowly rose to his feet, organized his bag of holding, and then somberly walked out of his residence. Moments later though, he came running back and started rummaging around under his bed until he found the leather coats he still had from back in his days at the Ovens. After donning several layers, he then placed his jade pendant somewhere he could access it easily. Were it not for the fact that it would have led to too many questions, he would have put his turtle-wok on his back. "Ah, why didn't I think of this earlier!" he thought regretfully. "I can't believe I forgot about that big black wok of mine." However, he was running out of time, and had no choice but to grit his teeth, turn, and leave. Taking a glance in the direction of the distant sun, his eyes filled with determination. Puffing his chest out, he began to climb toward the top of the mountain. At the moment, he was wearing far too many layers of leather clothing. Even though he didn't have the big black wok on, he still looked somewhat like a sticky rice dumpling.... He was bundled up so tightly that after walking for only a little bit, he was already starting to sweat. However, even if he sweat more profusely, he wouldn't shed even one item of clothing. The competition was too important, and he couldn't stop thinking about how brutal it would be. As he walked along the path, he suddenly realized that it was quite a foggy morning on the mountain, and he actually had no idea where exactly he was. "Did I take a wrong turn...?" he thought, and instantly looked around for someone to ask directions from. At the same time, his heart began to thump from the fear of possibly being late. ** At the top of Fragrant Cloud Peak was a fighting arena, which was where the competition was to take place. Quite a few people were already gathered there to watch the proceedings, and were chatting in hushed tones. There were even some disciples in the audience who were in the fifth level of Qi Condensation, although most of them stood there with arms folded across their chests as they looked at their Junior Brothers and Sisters who would be participating in the competition. Of course, there were also people there to cheer on their friends. This Outer Sect competition wasn't very formal, but it was a place where the participants could stand out from the crowd. There were about twenty people who had come to join the competition, all of whom were sitting in the area cross-legged in meditation, preparing in earnest for the fighting to begin. No one in the competition was in the third level of Qi Condensation. Although the rules allowed for that, most of the people who actually joined the competition were in the fifth level of Qi Condensation, although there were five or six who were in the fourth level. There was one young woman among the group who stood out from everyone else. She was tall and beautiful, and her Outer Sect disciple uniform could not conceal her curvaceous form. Anyone who laid eyes on her wouldn't be able to stop from slipping into a bit of a reverie. Her skin was white like snow, and she had eyebrows that curved as gracefully as willow leaves. She really was spectacularly beautiful. As for the Daoist trousers she wore, although they were loose, they stretched tightly around her rear end in a way that made it virtually impossible for any man to look away. There were quite a few Outer Sect disciples clustered around her, obviously her admirers. Although she couldn't quite compare to Zhou Xinqi, she was still one of the most famous of the Outer Sect disciples, Du Lingfei. [1. Du Lingfei's name in Chinese is 杜玲妃 dù líng fēi. Du is a common surname. Ling means "to rise up." Fei means "luxurious"] "Elder Sister Du's cultivation base is in the great circle of the fifth level of Qi Condensation, so she'll definitely take first place in this competition. There's not even any suspense in the matter." "You can't underestimate Elder Brother Chen Zi'ang, though. I heard that he had a cultivation base breakthrough last month. He might not be in the great circle of the fifth level of Qi Condensation, but he's close." Standing not too far away from Du Lingfei was an arrogant-looking young man, the same Chen Zi'ang who had been shocked by Bai Xiaochun's bamboo outside the Missions Office that day. Even as everyone was discussing the matter, Chen Zi'ang looked over at Du Lingfei with a strange gleam in his eyes. Although he wasn't too confident in

being able to take first place, he was pretty certain he could take second. Besides, he might also be able to take advantage of the situation to get to know Du Lingfei a bit better. It was at about this point that two beams of light whistled through the air from off in the distance. It was none other than Li Qinghou, followed by an emaciated old man. The old man had swarthy skin, but his eyes shone brightly, and he seemed like a very strict person. The surrounding Outer Sect disciples were completely shocked to find that Li Qinghou would be in attendance at the competition, and quickly clasped hands in greeting. "Greeting, Peak Lord. Greetings, Elder Sun." Everyone was flabbergasted that the peak lord would personally come to an event like this. Small competitions like this were almost always presided over by Elder Sun. Du Lingfei and Chen Zi'ang were also shocked, and had very serious expressions on their faces as they bowed in greeting to Li Qinghou. Li Qinghou looked around benevolently, nodding. As he scanned the crowd of disciples, however, he frowned when he realized that Bai Xiaochun wasn't there. When the surrounding Outer Sect disciple saw Li Qinghou frowning, their hearts began to thump. Du Lingfei instantly began to get nervous, unsure of why the peak lord might be displeased. "Shall we begin, Peak Lord?" asked Elder Sun, who stood next to Li Qinghou. Li Qinghou was just about to reply when, all of a sudden, a sweat-soaked spheroid shape could be seen speeding toward them from off in the distance. "I got lost!" cried Bai Xiaochun as he ran along. "It was too foggy...." Not only was Bai Xiaochun very nervous, he also felt that the whole situation was very unfair. After all, he wasn't very familiar with all the mountain paths, and considering how foggy it had been, he had simply gotten lost while thinking. As soon as the words left his mouth, all of the Outer Sect disciple involuntarily looked over. There were quite a few of them who were familiar with Bai Xiaochun, and when they heard the words he called out, they began to snicker. As for those who didn't know him, they frowned, and gleams of derision could be seen in their eyes. As far as they were concerned, the only reason he could have for getting lost on the way to the competition was that he rarely ventured up to the top of the mountain, and didn't care much about the competitions that the sect held. Most likely, he was only used to strolling around for pleasure. Du Lingfei looked at him, and remembered him as one of the people who had been chasing after Zhou Xinqi recently. Supposedly, he had worked hard to catch the great chicken bandit. Du Lingfei immediately turned away in disdain, not willing to even look at him. Chen Zi'ang looked at Bai Xiaochun in complete shock, and couldn't help but glance over at Li Qinghou. He hadn't forgotten what Bai Xiaochun had said at the Missions Office about Li Qinghou being his uncle. That would explain why Li Qinghou had been frowning right now, and after analyzing the matter, he realized that when fighting Bai Xiaochun, he would have to be careful not to beat him too badly. Li Qinghou snorted coldly, glaring at Bai Xiaochun for a moment before nodding at Elder Sun. Elder Sun looked thoughtfully at Bai Xiaochun for a moment, then laughed and waved his sleeve. "Very well. All disciples who wish to participate in the Outer Sect fighting competition, please step into the arena." Seeing Li Qinghou's glare caused Bai Xiaochun to feel more than ever that the situation was completely unfair. However, he didn't dare to give voice to his sentiments. As soon as the words left Elder Sun's mouth, Bai Xiaochun was the first disciple to leap up onto the platform, chest puffed out proudly, looking as though mountains of daggers and seas of flames couldn't impinge on his honor. Soon, all the contestants were in the arena. Including Bai Xiaochun, there were twenty in total. The rules for competitions like this one were fairly lax. Elder Sun looked at the contestants for a moment, then pulled out a small cloth sack, within which were a collection of marbles with numbers on them. One by one, the competitors filed over to take a marble, which would indicate the order in which they fought. Bai Xiaochun didn't manage to get first in line. He got stuck in the middle, and when he pulled out his marble, it had the number 11 written on it. "Very well," Elder Sun said coolly. "Now, everyone step back so that the first match can begin. Fighters number one and two, prepare to begin!" Bai Xiaochun and the others quickly left the fighting arena, whereas the disciples with the number one and two marbles remained. As the two stared each other down, brilliant light began to shine in their eyes. Soon they began to fight, and the booming sounds of battle rang out. Meanwhile, Bai Xiaochun's mind was racing. He kept telling himself that, considering there were twenty people in this competition, all he had to do was win twice to make it into the top 5. He was also wondering who it was that got the number twelve marble, but no one was willing to reveal to everyone else which numbers they had, making it virtually impossible for him to determine who he would be fighting. Even as his spirits began to fall, the first match ended, and the second began. Du Lingfei was one of the fighters in this match,

and she immediately performed an incantation gesture, causing a banner to fly out, which then turned into a stream of mist that enveloped her opponent. After struggling a bit, the disciple couldn't escape, and conceded, filled with admiration for Du Lingfei. The third and fourth matches went by quickly enough, and when it came time for the fifth match, Chen Zi'ang secured a quick and efficient victory over a disciple in the fourth level of Qi Condensation. "Fighters number eleven and twelve, step forward and let the match begin," Elder Sun called out. Bai Xiaochun took a deep breath and walked forward, a very serious expression on his face. After setting foot into the arena, he found that his opponent was a tall, gaunt young man with a cold smile on his face. His cultivation base was extraordinary, in the fifth level of Qi Condensation. His eyes flashed like lightning, and overall, he seemed like the type of person who was not to be trifled with. "Well, Junior Brother," the gaunt young man said, his voice cold, "you have the bad luck to have run into me in the first round. It's not too late to concede. If you don't, you'll have to take responsibility for yourself if you get injured." However, in the instant that the words left the young man's mouth, Bai Xiaochun suddenly let out a powerful roar. The roar was so intense that everything shook, and quite a few audience members were shocked. The gaunt young man was also taken aback, and even backed up a bit without even thinking about it, staring at Bai Xiaochun with wide eyes. After roaring, Bai Xiaochun slapped his jade pendant, causing a green glow to surround him. That didn't leave him feeling safe, though, so he pulled out a big stack of paper talismans, which he rapidly stuck all over himself. Each time he did, they would emit a powerful glow, until he was covered with no less than ten individual shields. Their combined power transformed into a protective wall nearly a meter-and-a-half thick. From a distance, the sight was completely shocking. Because of all the protective shields, Bai Xiaochun's subsequent shout was actually a bit muffled. "Alright, bring it on!" The gaunt young man was still staring blankly at Bai Xiaochun, and it wasn't just him. The other Outer Sect disciples, including the other contestants, were all gaping in shock. In all the times they had observed competitions like this, they had never seen anyone use protective shields to such an extent. Li Qinghou's face twitched, but from the look in his eyes, it was clear he could do nothing about the situation. Chen Zi'ang took a deep breath as he grew even more certain that Bai Xiaochun and Li Qinghou were actually relatives. However, Du Lingfei simply gave a cold harrumph, and her derision increased. Everyone watched with wide eyes as the gaunt young man down in the arena let out his own roar, then performed a double-handed incantation gesture, causing a wooden sword to fly directly toward Bai Xiaochun.