

After waiting for what seemed like forever, nothing unusual happened. Bai Xiaochun looked thoughtfully at the patterns on the turtle-wok, and then looked down into the stove itself. Nothing remained of the wood but ash so he left, to return a few minutes later with some more firewood.

Firewood for personal use wasn't very common in the Ovens, so he'd been forced to go find Big Fatty Zhang to make a special request for some more. After kindling the fire, Bai Xiaochun once again focused on the first design on the turtle-wok. As the wood burned, the design lit up. Bai Xiaochun's heart began to thump with excitement, and then suddenly, the wooden sword began to shine with blinding silver light. He backed up a few paces, after which the light slowly faded away, and a piercing sensation began to emanate out from inside the wok. He took a deep breath and carefully sidled up to the wok. The wooden sword, just like the grain of spirit rice, now had a bright silver design on it, which gradually faded to a deep silver color! The sword appeared different than before. Although it was still made of wood, it now seemed more like it was made from metal. Bai Xiaochun's eyes lit up as he carefully took the sword out of the wok. It felt heavier, and also emanated a certain coldness. "It worked! My first spirit enhancement on the wooden sword worked!" Bai Xiaochun fondled the sword ecstatically, then glanced over at the wok and tried to decide what to do with it. In the end, he decided to just leave it where it was. The more he treated it like an ordinary item, the less likely it was that anyone would pay attention to it. As for the spirit rice, he decided to eat it bit by bit over time. He would also be careful to not let anyone see the wooden sword. As an added measure, he came up with the idea of somehow painting over the glowing design. Finally, he tidied his room, then walked out nonchalantly, as if nothing unusual had occurred. Over the next few days, he collected some various liquid materials from the Ovens which he used to paint the sword, making it bright and colorful, albeit somewhat unsightly. The most important thing was that the spirit design was covered up well enough that it wasn't obvious. In the end, Bai Xiaochun nodded his head in satisfaction. As the days passed, Bai Xiaochun became as comfortable with life in the Ovens as a fish in water. He quickly fit in with the other Elder Brothers, and also became familiar with the work that went on there. He soon found that different types of fire were necessary for cooking different spirit foods. In fact, the different types of fire were described in terms of color; there were one-colored flames, two-colored flames, and so on. The wood he had used earlier to heat the turtle-wok had been one-colored firewood. Big Fatty Zhang began to grow especially fond of Bai Xiaochun, and took special care of him. Furthermore, just as he'd said, after a few months passed, Bai Xiaochun was starting to gain weight. He was no longer the scrawny kid he had been when he had first joined the sect. He was fatter, but at the same time, his skin was also fairer and clearer than before. He also looked more harmless than ever, and was clearly reaching the point of being deserving of the title Ninth Fatty Bai. He also experienced the special snack-time arrangement on more than one occasion. However, what Bai Xiaochun found especially frustrating was that, despite gaining weight, his cultivation seemed to progress as slowly as ever. Eventually, he stopped worrying about that and spent most of his time eating and drinking with his Elder Brothers. Life was good. As the months passed, he heard bits of gossip about recent events in the Spirit Stream Sect. In addition, Big Fatty Zhang taught him more about the sect in general. He learned that the sect disciples were divided into the Inner and Outer Sects. Any servant who could practice cultivation all the way to the third level of Qi Condensation would be able to challenge one of the trials by fire, which were paths that existed on the various mountain peaks in the sect. A servant who passed the trial by fire could join that mountain peak as an Outer Sect disciple. Only by becoming an Outer Sect disciple could

anyone truly become a part of the Spirit Stream Sect. However, accomplishing such a feat would count as a stunning accomplishment, and would be equivalent to the old saying about the fish leaping over the dragon gate. Only the top three competitors in the monthly trials by fire would be accepted, meaning that the number of people who could become an Outer Sect disciple was limited. On one particular day, Seventh Fatty had been scheduled to go out and purchase supplies, but ended up being busy with some other matters. As a result, Big Fatty Zhang called for Bai Xiaochun and told him to stand in for Seventh Fatty. Bai Xiaochun hesitated for a moment, recalling the incident with Xu Baocai from a few months before. Although it probably wasn't anything to worry about, he couldn't shake his anxiety. Before leaving, he went back to his room and collected eight meat cleavers [1. Quick note about the meat cleavers. In Chinese the word is literally "vegetable knife," and could more properly be translated as "kitchen knife." However, the most common kitchen knife that you find in most Chinese households is what we would call a cleaver in English. You can see that by going to baidu and doing an image search for the term "vegetable knife" in Chinese. You'll see a couple "normal" kitchen knives in that image search, because the word could also mean that. However, in both home kitchens and restaurant kitchens in China, cleavers are used for everything from cutting big chunks of meat to julienning vegetables, as you can see demonstrated by Anthony Bourdain and Eric Ripert in this video] and also donned six long leather coats. By the time he was finished getting dressed, he looked like a round ball. However, he also felt much safer, which was the important thing. The last thing he did was strap his wok onto his back, leaving him feeling very safe. He then staggered out of the Ovens and down the mountain. As he walked along the green limestone paths in the sect, he gazed around at the beautiful buildings and courtyards, and began to feel prouder than ever. "How time flies!" he mused, clasping his hands behind his back. "Life is like a dream. I, Bai Xiaochun, have only spent a few months practicing cultivation. However, as I think back to the mortal world, and my life in the village, it fills my eyes with tears." He walked along with eight meat cleavers hanging from his belt, a wok on his back, and multiple layers of clothing, looking very much like a dilapidated toy ball. Occasionally, he would encounter other servants, who would stare at him out of the corners of their eyes as he passed. There were even a few female disciples who couldn't help but laugh out loud when they saw him. They covered their mouths with their hands, and the sound of their laughter was like silver bells, clear and melodious. Face slightly flushed, Bai Xiaochun couldn't help but feel even more impressive than ever. Clearing his throat, he stuck his chest out and continued to saunter along. Before too much time had passed, and before he had even left the third peak's servants' district, he noticed that quite a few servants were rushing off into the distance, looking very excited. They appeared to be heading in the direction of the path that led up to the top of the third peak, a place where Outer Sect disciples often congregated. More and more servants began running over in that direction, looking very excited. Surprised by the scene, Bai Xiaochun quickly grabbed a scrawny servant who happened to be running by. "Junior Brother, what's going on?" Bai Xiaochun asked quizzically. "Why is everyone running over there?" The young man looked over angrily, but then saw the black wok on Bai Xiaochun's back, and his expression turned envious. "I didn't realize you were from the Ovens, Elder Brother. Why don't you come along? Two Chosen from the Outer Sect, Zhou Hong and Zhang Yide, are fighting it out in the trial by fire arena. Supposedly, the two of them have a beef with each other. Whatever happens, they're both at the sixth level of Qi Condensation, so we should be able to learn a bit by watching them, and maybe even gain some enlightenment." Finishing his explanation, the young man hurried off, apparently worried about missing out on any of the action. Feeling very curious, Bai Xiaochun set off in a hurry, following the flow of people as they left the servants' district and headed to the foot of the third peak, where a large raised platform could be seen. The platform was about 3,000 meters wide, and was surrounded by a crowd of servants. There were even people watching from positions further up on the mountain, all of whom wore resplendent clothing, and were clearly Outer Sect disciples. Two young men occupied the platform, both of whom wore extravagant outfits. One of them had a scar running down his face, the other had skin as white as jade. The two of them were fighting back and forth, causing booming sounds to echo out. The glow of magical items surrounded both of them. Floating in front of the scar-faced youth was a small flag that fluttered of its own volition, as if some invisible hand were waving it. The swirling flag formed the shape of a mist tiger, which let out deafening roars. The jade-faced youth danced back and forth as he fought. He had a small blue sword which whistled

through the air, leaving behind streaks of light. When Bai Xiaochun saw the sword flying about, he gasped. Although he could control his own wooden sword in a similar way, it would be impossible to even compare his level of skill with that of the jade-faced young man. What was even more remarkable was how the two young men didn't seem to be holding anything back. Killing intent roiled off of them, and within a short time, numerous deadly situations arose. Both were heavily wounded, and despite the fact that the wounds weren't critical, it was still a shocking sight. This was Bai Xiaochun's first time seeing cultivators fighting, and it was very different from how he had imagined immortals would look when they fought. The cruel and vicious way they attacked each other left his heart pounding in fear. "Immortal cultivation... isn't just about living forever? What's this fighting and killing all about? What if I end up losing my poor little life...?" Bai Xiaochun swallowed nervously as he watched the scar-faced youth's mist tiger lunging voraciously at the other young man. Wiping the sweat from his brow, Bai Xiaochun suddenly realized that the outside world was a very dangerous place; it was probably a much better idea to stay back in the Ovens where it was safe. Having reached this conclusion, he began to hurry off when, all of a sudden, he heard someone shouting his name. "Bai Xiaochun!!" He turned his head and saw the author of the blood notice, Xu Baocai, hurrying in his direction, a vicious expression on his face. A wooden sword floated next to him, glittering with an unusual light that clearly surpassed the first level of Qi Condensation. As the sword flew along, it left a streak of light in its wake, and sent a formidable spirit pressure emanating out. When Bai Xiaochun saw that wooden sword heading in his direction, his eyes went wide, and an intense sense of deadly crisis welled up in him. "He's gonna kill me!" he thought. Instantly, he began to run in the opposite direction, screaming: "Murder! Murder!" The other servants in the area all heard, and looked over in shock. The cries were so loud that even Zhou Hong and Zhang Yide stopped fighting. In fact, even Xu Baocai was unnerved by the screams. He had obviously just yelled Bai Xiaochun's name and then started to chase him. His sword hadn't even touched Bai Xiaochun, and yet Bai Xiaochun was screaming as though he had been stabbed repeatedly. Xu Baocai hated Bai Xiaochun so much his gums itched. Face ashen, he ran after him, shouting: "Come on, Bai Xiaochun, you know how to fight! What are you running away for!?" "If I knew how to fight, why would I be running away, you moron!? I would have killed you a long time ago! Murder! Murder!" Bai Xiaochun's screams grew even louder as he fled in the opposite direction like a fat little bunny. Meanwhile, in a building which jutted out into the air at the very peak of the mountain, two men were in the middle of playing a game of Go. One was middle-aged, the other was an old man. The middle-aged man was none other than Li Qinghou. As for the old man, he had a full head of white hair, and a ruddy complexion. His eyes glittered brightly, and he was clearly no ordinary individual. Currently, he was looking down at the scene playing out down below. Chuckling, he said, "What an interesting child you brought back to the sect, Qinghou." "How embarrassing, sect leader. The kid's personality definitely needs a lot more work." Feeling a headache coming on, Li Qinghou placed his game piece onto the board and then shook his head. "The kids in the Ovens are pretty stuck up, and yet this kid fits right in," scoffed the old man, stroking his beard. "Not an easy task. Hmm..."