

**That night, martial law was imposed on Eastwood City. All of the cultivator clans sprang into action, carrying out a thorough investigation in the entire city. As for Bai Xiaochun and Du Lingfei, they disappeared into the night.**

Du Lingfei explained to Bai Xiaochun that her commission was almost over, and there would be no harm in returning to the sect early. As such, she would accompany him on his way back. \*\* It was late at night. Stars twinkled in the sky, and the moon hung high and bright. Bai Xiaochun and Du Lingfei sat on a mountaintop looking out at the stars. Du Lingfei looked even more beautiful than usual under the starlight. Smiling, she looked over at Bai Xiaochun as he recounted the events which had occurred during their years apart. "You wouldn't believe it, boo. On the south bank, they actually pelted me with stones. Man, that hurt so much.... "I didn't mean for things in 10,000 Snakes Valley to turn out that way! I just wanted the snakes to look a little cuter.... "After you get back to the sect, boo, you definitely have to tell me if you see that damned rabbit! "Those guys on the north bank are complete bullies. I got sent to the north bank, alone and impoverished. I scuttled around with my tail between my legs, scared of offending anyone, but they still didn't let me off the hook...." As he told his stories of the Spirit Stream Sect, Du Lingfei occasionally comforted him and occasionally chuckled. The looks of praise and surprise she gave him got Bai Xiaochun even more worked up. She protested his use of the nickname 'boo', and did so more than once, but it didn't do any good. In fact, the more she protested, the more he used it. "Boo, boo, boo...." Finally, she simply shook her head and sighed in resignation. Eventually, they found a mountain cave where they settled down for the night. Bai Xiaochun sat down cross-legged to meditate, and after a bit of time passed, a gentle breeze picked up. Strangely, Bai Xiaochun didn't notice the breeze at all. Du Lingfei opened her eyes and looked over at Bai Xiaochun, mixed emotions swirling in her eyes. After a moment, she stood and walked out of the cave to look up at the bright moon up overhead. A gust of wind blew a strand of her hair out of place, and she reached up to tuck it behind her ear. However, when her finger reached the hair, it passed directly through it. Du Lingfei looked at her shimmering index finger, and the complexity in her eyes deepened. Clenching her hand into a fist caused the finger to become solid again, after which she tucked the stray hair into place. "Not much time left...." Some more time passed. Looking very melancholy, Du Lingfei walked back into the cave and looked at Bai Xiaochun sitting there quietly. Being careful not to jostle him, she sat down by his side and rested her head on his shoulder. After she closed her eyes, a smile appeared on her face. Time passed as they traveled along. Three days went by, which didn't seem like a very long time for Bai Xiaochun. He fantasized a bit about what it would be like to return to the sect as a Heaven-Dao Foundation Establishment expert, and how he would be the center of all attention. Every time he thought about it, he got more excited. Du Lingfei wanted to slow the trip down, but when she saw how excited he was, she simply smiled and held her tongue. On the third day, Bai Xiaochun's Foundation Establishment cultivation base stabilized, and they were getting very close to the Spirit Stream Sect. Deep in the night of the third day, when they were only about a day's journey from the Spirit Stream Sect, Du Lingfei suggested that they rest for a bit. They found a mountain cave, where Bai Xiaochun began to recount his terrifying experiences in the Fallen Sword World. As he spoke, he began to feel tired, and before he realized what was happening, was asleep. Everything was very quiet, with the only sound being the popping and hissing of the little fire they'd built. Inside the cave, the flames cast dancing shadows, and outside, it was pitch black. Everything was very peaceful. Du Lingfei gazed into the fire for a while, then looked over at the sleeping Bai Xiaochun, a soft look in her eyes as she thought back to the past. By this point, she wasn't paying any attention to her physical body, which was starting to shimmer and turn translucent. After a long moment passed, she sighed. Giving Bai Xiaochun

a deep look, she rose to her feet, trembling a bit. At this point, she noticed his mouth curve up into a smile as he slept. Apparently he was having a wonderful dream of some sort. Leaning down, she kissed him softly on the lips, then turned and walked out of the cave, a look of determination spreading across her face. As she emerged, the air rippled and distorted as nine shadowy figures appeared. They were all mysterious and enigmatic, even bizarre, and as they stood there, the air around them shimmered and flickered. Unexpectedly, all nine of the figures clasped hands and bowed deeply to Du Lingfei. From the respect they showed, they almost seemed like servants. One of the shadowy figures stepped forward and spoke in a raspy voice that almost seemed to emanate from the ancient past. "Junior Matriarch, the task you assigned us has been accomplished. All eleven individuals are right here." With that, he waved his hand, causing eleven severed heads to tumble out. The faces of each and every head were twisted into expressions of terror and disbelief. Shockingly, these were all the spies that had infiltrated Eastwood City with the intention of killing Bai Xiaochun. Du Lingfei ignored the severed heads and the nine shadowy figures. Turning around, she looked at the slumbering Bai Xiaochun. "Everything about me in the Spirit Stream Sect was a sham," she murmured, her eyes glistening as if tears were welling up. "The only real thing was that time when the Luo Chen Clan was chasing us. "My mission is accomplished, but for some reason, I'm not happy. I hope you can forgive me.... I'm sorry, Bai Xiaochun." As the tears spilled out onto her cheeks, they rolled down her face and transformed into ash which drifted away into the wind. One of the shadowy figures clasped hands and respectfully said, "Junior Matriarch, this mortal body the patriarch crafted for you won't last for much longer. He sent us here to escort you back. Will you be coming, ma'am?" Du Lingfei continued to look at Bai Xiaochun for a long moment, then nodded lightly. She looked exhausted. Finally, she turned to leave. As she did, her body slowly vanished, transforming into nothing more than smoke. The nine shadowy figures also vanished.... As for the eleven severed heads, they dissolved into ash. The following morning at dawn, as the first rays of sunlight reached into the cave, Bai Xiaochun squinted as he slowly opened his eyes. "I'm thirsty, boo...." he said, yawning. He was a bit surprised; after beginning to practice cultivation, he'd found that he didn't need to sleep as often, but just now, he'd slept for quite a long time. Rubbing his eyes, he stood up and looked around for Du Lingfei. When he didn't see her, he didn't think too much of it. Walking out of the cave, he looked over at the rising sun and then stretched lazily. "I must have tired myself out too much recently. Man, what a good night's sleep." At the moment, he felt more energetic than ever, as though a boundless life force were pulsing inside of him. His nine spiritual seas were golden through and through, and he was completely and fully in the Heaven-Dao Foundation Establishment stage. His aura had ceased to focus inward, and with every breath he took, he could almost hear waves crashing in his spiritual seas. He felt better now than he ever had before, and decided to meditate for a bit, both to familiarize himself with his Heaven-Dao Foundation Establishment and its Heaven-Dao aura, and also to wait for Du Lingfei. After two hours passed, and Du Lingfei hadn't returned, Bai Xiaochun opened his eyes, feeling somewhat nervous. "Still not back yet?" he thought. He pulled out a transmission jade slip and sent a message to her, but it did as much good as throwing a rock into the sea. There wasn't any response at all. "What's going on?!" He shot to his feet and immediately began to search the area. By the time evening fell, he'd looked everywhere, but hadn't found a single trace.... Du Lingfei... had disappeared! By this point, he was wracked with anxiety, and had the feeling that something bad had happened. Face ashen, eyes bloodshot, he expanded his search. "Where are you, boo!? "Du Lingfei, where are you?!? "Du Lingfei...." He searched for four days in a row, looking everywhere he could think of. Soon his hair was disheveled, and he looked like he was losing weight. However, Du Lingfei was nowhere to be found. "Did I say something wrong, boo? Why are you hiding from me? Tell me! "Du Lingfei, come out, wherever you are! "What happened!?" He was going mad with anxiety by this point. Eventually, he went back to the cave where he had last seen her, and searched the entire place with a fine toothed comb. Unfortunately, the result was the same as before. He wasn't sure why, but his heart hurt. It felt like someone was ripping it into pieces, and was a feeling the likes of which he had never experienced before. Clutching his hands tightly at the pit of his stomach, he thought back to how he had fallen asleep for no apparent reason, and then his heart sank. Eventually, a blank look appeared in his eyes.

\*\* The fact that Bai Xiaochun had been away for so long without returning caused the sect to send out even more people to find him. Hou Yunfei led a team, as did other key disciples from the south and

north banks. Even Li Qinghou helped. When they finally found him, he was sitting outside of that cave, his eyes bloodshot, his face gaunt. He looked bedeviled. When Li Qinghou saw him, he felt a twinge of pain at the sight, and asked, "Xiaochun, what's wrong?!" Bai Xiaochun shivered. Eyes blank, he turned to look at Li Qinghou and murmured, "Uncle Li, Du Lingfei... is gone."