

Foxs' Wuxia

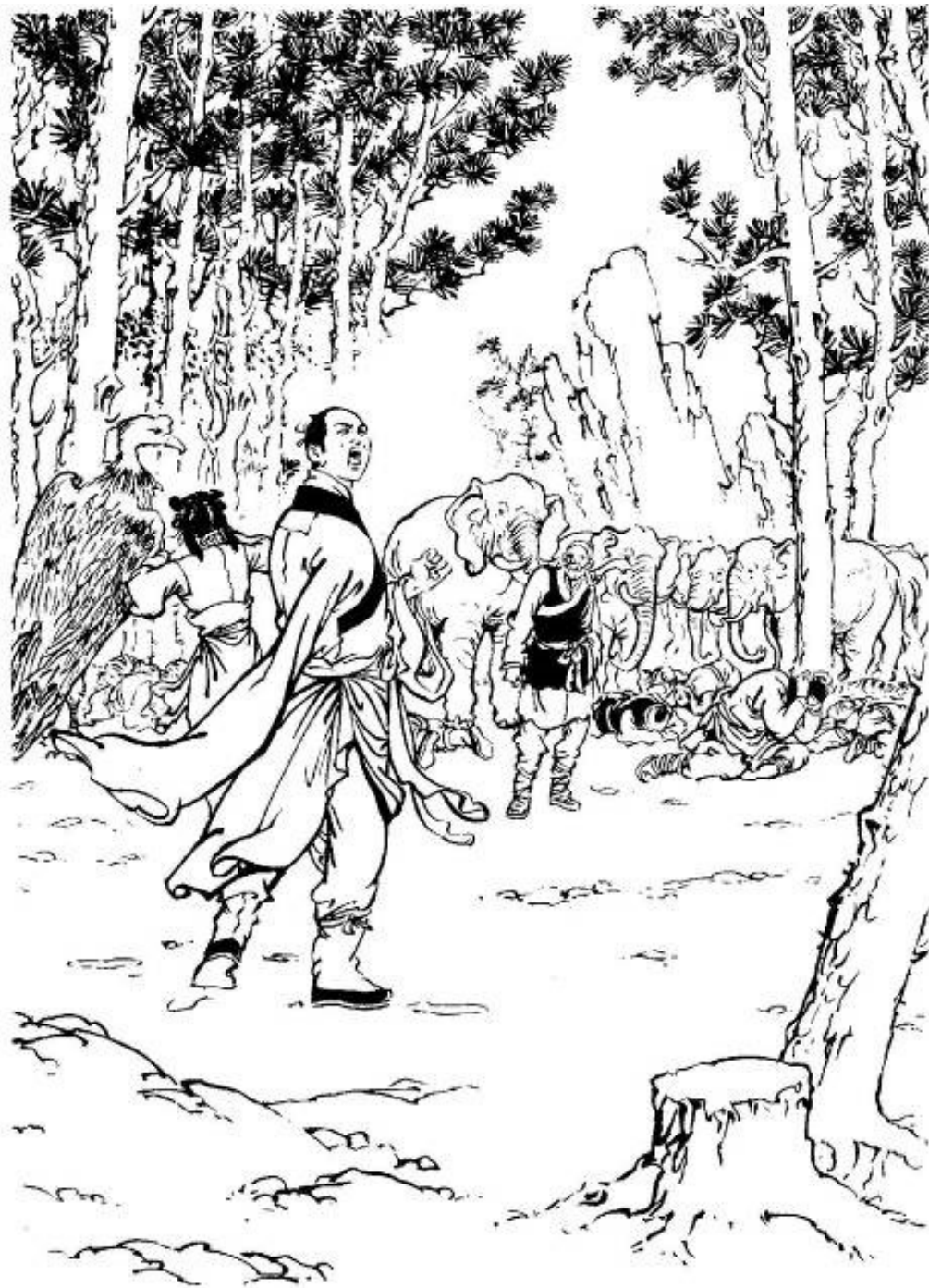
Wuxia Fan Translation

SDXL Chapter 34



Chapter 34 – Settling a Dispute

Translated by Jin_Yong_Fan & Foxs



Yang Guo opened his mouth and roared to the sky. It was like a tiger or dragon's roar. Guo Xiang's heartbeat sped up and she could barely stand up. Yang Guo's dragon roar seemed like it would never end. The animals started to fall down one by one; the Xishan Ghosts and the Shi Brothers also fell down; leaving only the elephants and two people barely standing up. They were Shi Shu Gang and Guo Xiang.

Above them was none other than Yang Guo. During these sixteen years his heart ached and yearned for Xiao Longnu. He wandered around with his eagle and did many heroic deeds, earning him the title 'Eagle Hero'. He knew that he was young and handsome

and had attracted lots of girls already. Miss Gongsun sacrificed herself for him, Cheng Ying and Lu Wushuang loved him dearly. So he often wore Huang Yaoshi's human skin mask, to conceal his real looks. This night he had an appointment with the Xishan Ghosts; but after waiting for half a night without seeing any of them, he went looking and arrived at the forest.

The Xishan Ghosts were holding tight to their dear lives in the battle against the beasts. Upon hearing Yang Guo's voice they were desperate. With one more formidable enemy they lost all hope of ever escaping alive. They thought, "It's over. It's over. This might possibly be our last battle."

"You others are the Beastly Mountain Villagers, the Shi brothers?" Yang Guo called, "Can you hold your palms and listen to me for a second."

Shi Bowei said, "Our surname is indeed 'Shi'. Who are you, Sir?" He paused a moment and said, "Ah! I believe you are the Eagle Hero?"

Yang Guo said, "You are correct. I am the Eagle Hero. Quickly call off your beasts or else the Xishan Ghosts will turn into real ghosts."

Shi Bowei said, "Everybody will turn into real ghosts."

Yang Guo said, "The Xishan Ghosts have an appointment with me. If they do die, who will speak to me?"

Shi Bowei heard him say all this and gave out a cold laugh. Yang Guo said, "You know I am the Eagle Hero, why aren't you listening to me?"

Shi Bowei said, "So what if you are the Eagle Hero. If you have any skills, come down here and pull the animals back yourself."

Yang Guo said, "OK. Brother Eagle, lets get down." One man and one eagle leapt from the tree.

Shaking out his sleeve, he jumped down with the eagle. Several beasts immediately pounced at them as soon as their feet touched the ground. The eagle waved its wings left and right. The wolves and other smaller animals were pushed back by the gust of wind alone. The bigger animals were knocked down or pushed back staggering with each hit. Suddenly a very big lion and a very big tiger leaped at them with loud roars. The eagle again parried the attack with its formidable wings. The lion and the tiger

were knocked over down. The eagle's left wing struck the tiger's head and it died instantly. This incident frightened the other animals away.

Shi Bowei was furious. With all his fingers open like a claw he leaped and tried to grab Yang Guo's chest. Yang Guo only smiled, then moved his body a little bit and shook his empty sleeve. "Smack!" the sleeve hit Shi Bowei's hands as if hit by a saber. Bowei cried out in pain.

Walking slowly Shi Shugang tried to push Yang Guo with both his hands. "Good!" cried Yang Guo, parrying the attack with his left hand. He only exerted 30% of his energy. After training against the waves of the tide for many years, Yang Guo's strength was formidable. He could push a big tree down, let alone a mere flesh and blood human.

Shi Shugang had received some lessons on internal energy and thus had strong internal energy. Even so, when Yang Guo's hand touched his, he could not help but stagger back. He tried with all his might to hold his ground.

"Watch out!" shouted Yang Guo, while pushing him back. Shi Shugang's vision darkened and he knew he was going to die.

"Ah! You're sick?" suddenly hearing Yang Guo's voice. Immediately he felt the enormous power pushing him back vanish and Shi Shugang was spared. He was startled and stared at the Eagle Hero blankly.

Looking at him, Shi Bowei, Shi Zhongmeng, Shi Jiqiang and Shi Mengjie thought that their brother was heavily injured. Roaring loudly they attacked Yang Guo in unison.

In a flash Yang Guo leaped and grabbed a tiger by the neck, which he then used as his weapon to parry the four brothers' attack.

As we remember, Yang Guo had used the heavy black-steel sword; weight about 70 catties, even before he trained against the tide's waves. The tiger was only a little over 100 catties. Thus he easily lifted and used the tiger as a weapon against its own masters. The tiger clawed and bit frantically.

Guo Xiang watched this incident from the sideline. She was delighted; laughing and clapping she shouted, "Good! Eagle Hero, good! Shi Brothers, you'd better surrender now."

Yang Guo looked at the girl out of the corner of his eye, wondering in his heart, “Who is this girl? She plays with leopards, yet does not take the Shi Brothers’ side.”

In the meantime, Shi Shugang tried to circulate his ‘chi’, and finding nothing amiss, he understood the Eagle Hero had shown him mercy. He thought, “Based on our true skills, even if the five of us go together, we would not be his match.” Looking at his brothers he shouted, “Brothers, stop! We have to know our limits.”

Hearing his shout, Shi Zhongmeng who was thrusting his silver pipe immediately pulled his weapon back. But the ‘Immortal of Giant Strength’ Shi Jiqiang, the reckless one of the family, didn’t listen; he thought, “What limits? Let him eat my staff first, and then we talk.” He kept attacking Yang Guo’s head with his “Elephant Opening a Mountain” stance. This attack mimicked how an elephant used its trunk. His copper staff was shaped like an elephant trunk; small in front, bigger and a little curved toward the back. His force was a mixture of ‘hard’ and ‘soft’; no less than 1000 jins strong.

Yang Guo did not budge. He threw his tiger away, flipped his hand, and caught the end of the staff. He smiled and said, “OK let’s have a duel and see who is stronger.”

Shi Jiqiang used all his strength to push down. His ‘Elephant Trunk Staff’ was above Yang Guo’s head but no matter how much force Shi Jiqiang used the staff would not go down.

Shi Shugang said, “Fourth brother, don’t be rude.”

Shi Jiqiang tried to retreat and pull his staff away but it wouldn’t budge. Shi Jiqiang tried to pull back three times but still couldn’t retrieve his staff. Yang Guo thought, “He has a powerful strength; if I don’t overcome his with my strength this man will not give in.”

So Yang Guo used his full strength, his left hand came up and grabbed the middle of the staff. The force was focused towards the middle of the staff trying to force Shi Jiqiang to release it. But Shi Jiqiang did not let go forcing the staff to bend upwards.

Yang Guo shouted out, “Good!” He used his strength and internal energy and caused the staff to bend down. But Shi Jiqiang still refused to let go.

”Crack!” the staff broke in half. Shi Jiqiang’s palms were both bleeding, but he still held the half staff in his hands. Yang Guo saw Shi Jiqiang’s tenacity and thought it was amus-

ing and started laughing. He picked up the other half of the staff and threw it to the ground. It struck the earth and went deep until it was completely buried.

He looked around and saw the Shi brothers, Shi Shugang, Shi Mengjie and the others were trying to calm down and control all the beasts. But because they had smelled blood; the beasts were out of control. Yang Guo signaled to Guo Xiang to plug her ears. Guo Xiang did not understand but still listened and did what she was told. She saw Yang Guo opened his mouth and he roared to the sky. It was like a tiger or dragon's roar.

Even though Guo Xiang had plugged her ears, she could still hear the roar. Her heart-beat sped up and she could barely stand up. But luckily she had practiced the purest form of internal energy with her father Guo Jing and her mother Huang Rong ever since she was little. So even though she was young, her internal energy was better than an average martial artists and she didn't fall down but only staggered a few times.

Yang Guo's dragon roar seemed like it would never end. Everybody's face changed color. The animals started to fall down one by one, leaving only the elephants still standing. Slowly one by one the Xishan Ghosts fell down. Next the Shi Brothers also fell down; leaving only two people barely standing up. They were Shi Shugang and Guo Xiang. Yang Guo was amazed and impressed that this sick man, Shi Shugang, was able to stay standing. He knew that if he continued he would hurt Shi Shugang even more.

So he waved his sleeve and his dragon roar stopped. The eagle looked proudly at Yang Guo. Only then did everybody and the beasts slowly stand up. The wolves and other small animals had not awakened yet; their bodies still scattered about on the snow. The larger animals did not wait for the Shi Brothers' command, they tucked their tails between their legs and scampered away deep into the woods, not even daring to look back. The Shi Brothers and Xishan Ghosts have never met such opponent in their entire lives. They just stared at Yang Guo and could not utter a single word. Yang Guo said, "Shi Brothers, I apologize for the disturbance. I have an appointment with Xishan Ghosts; but since you had started fighting, I had to intervene. After taking care of this small problem, I will let you continue your fight and I promise not to be on anybody's side." He turned his body around and continued, "Well? Are you going to fight me one on one, or are all of you going to fight me together?"

The one supposed to answer his question would be the Fairy Ghost, the burly man with a body like an iron tower, whose ears were cut off by the Eagle Hero. But since he was still dazed from the roar, he couldn't say anything. The Long Beard Ghost then moved a step forward. He clasped his fists in respect, bowing to the ground and said, "Eagle

Hero, your skill and ours are like heaven and earth apart. We, the Xishan Ghosts, do not dare to fight you. Our lives have been saved by you. In the future, if Great Hero (Da Xia) ever has any need of our services, even if we have to go through water or fire, we will comply. If Da Xia wants us to leave Shanxi, we will not stay another second.”

As soon as he saw the Long Beard Ghost, Yang Guo was suspicious. And now, after hearing his voice, he asked straight away, “Are you not the one surnamed Fan with a given name Yiweng?”

The Long Beard Ghost was indeed Fan Yiweng, the first disciple of Gongsun Zhi, master of the Passionless Valley. After Yang Guo spared his life at the Valley, he had run away and hidden himself. About ten years later he re-entered the Jianghu world and with his level of martial arts, he managed to attain the first position of the Xishan Ghosts. During the battle at the ‘Broken Heart Cliff’ Yang Guo’s arm had not yet been chopped off by Guo Fu. Besides, Yang Guo was wearing a mask now, so he did not recognize him. Hearing the question, he bowed and answered, “This lowly one is indeed Fan Yiweng. What is your command, Great Hero?”

Yang Guo smiled and lifted his hand. “Don’t use such humility. If you want my command, I will say it: Do not move away from Xishan. Fairy Ghost, you’d better let your four concubines go!”

“Very well,” said the Fairy Ghost. He was silent for a moment and then continued, “If they don’t want to go, I’ll beat them with a stick.”

Yang Guo was taken aback. He recalled what happened that day, how this Ghost’s wife and four concubines knelt down and begged him for mercy. He laughed and said, “No! You can’t beat them. If they want to leave, just let them leave; but if they want to stay with you ...” he heaved a sigh. “An outsider certainly cannot interfere. Uh, did you say you were going to take four more concubines to make yours exactly eight?”

The Fairy Ghost blushed. “Because of my concubines the Eagle Hero has had some trouble and my brothers and sisters were almost harmed,” he embarrassedly said. “Even if I want to do that, Big Brother certainly wouldn’t let me.” Everybody laughed hearing his response.

“Very well, this business is settled,” said Yang Guo. “Now you can continue your fight.” He moved aside and together with his eagle they were ready to be the spectators of the Shi Brothers versus the Xishan Ghost’s battle.

Fan Yiweng moved a few steps forward and said to Shi Bowei, “The Xishan Ghosts have met an ill-fated event today, and we are hurting; therefore, we’ll have to ask for your leave. However, may we know where your Beastly Mountain Village will be: in Shanxi or Liangzhou? The reason I asked, is so that we can pay a visit in the future.”

Shi Bowei understood the threat very well, he said, “We will wait for your visit in Liangzhou. But if ... if ... my third brother can’t be saved because of this, you don’t have to come to Liangzhou; the four of us will certainly pay you a visit wherever you are.”

Fan Yiweng was shocked. “What have we to do with Third Brother’s illness?” he wondered.

Shi Bowei’s face turned red and he shouted, “My Third Brother...” Shi Shugang sighed, “Eldest Brother, never mind. The Xishan Ghosts’ actions were unintentional; it is your younger brother’s fate. We don’t have to add unnecessary enmity.”

Shi Bowei struggled to control himself and said, “Fine!” He lifted one hand toward Fan Yiweng and said, “The green hill will not change; the green water always flows; we will meet again.” He turned to Yang Guo and said, “Eagle Hero, even if we train for another 30 years we are still not your match. We admit defeat. We will never dare to cross your path again.”

Yang Guo laughed, “There’s no need for that.”

Fan Yiweng was feeling uncomfortable with what had been said and asked, “Eldest Brother Shi, please wait. The Third Brother Shi said we unintentionally did something wrong. What did we do besides entering your territory without authorization? We, the Xishan Ghosts are not afraid to lose our heads; we are certainly not afraid to kowtow to apologize to you.”

Shi Bowei had seen that when they were under the animal’s attack they were throwing the fur hat to each other. Each one of them certainly did not fear death. They were also the kind of people who knew right from wrong. So mournfully he said, “You frightened off the ‘Nine-Tailed Spirit Fox’ [jiu wei ling hu] which my Third Brother needs for treatment of his internal injury. Even if we kill you a thousand times, or even ten thousand times, what good would that be?” Fan Yiweng was shocked; he recalled how the Shi Brothers were leading a large pack of animals to pursue that little fox and wondered why the fox was so important to them.

The Killer Ghost said, “What’s the use of this little fox? Mmm ... since it is important to the Third Brother’s well-being, let us join forces and capture that small fox. Wouldn’t it be great?”

Shi Jiqiang shouted, “What do you mean ‘great’? If you can catch that fox I will kowtow to you a hundred times, no, a thousand times!” He was getting emotional.

Fan Yiweng thought, “The Shi Brothers are animal experts without equal in the world. If THEY say it is difficult, what chance would other people have?” Thinking this he involuntarily cast a glance at Yang Guo.

Guo Xiang could not contain herself any longer. “Why do you keep talking? Why don’t you ask the Eagle Hero for help?” she interjected.

Shi Zhongmeng’s heart was stirred; he thought, “This Eagle Hero is highly skilled, maybe he really can help us.” But he said, “What do you know? Unless ‘da luo jin xian’ [the Great Golden Immortal surnamed Luo – I think he is one of Taoist deities] comes down to earth, who else would be able to catch that animal?” Yang Guo knew he deliberately provoked him; so he simply smiled.

Guo Xiang said, “What’s so special about the fox? Would the Second Shi Uncle care to explain?”

Shi Zhongmeng sighed and said, “Toward the end of the year before last my Third Brother defended against injustice in Liangzhou, but the enemy was playing dirty. My Third Brother was not careful and was severely injured ...”

Guo Xiang said, “The Third Uncle Shi’s skills are good. Who’s capable of hurting him?”

Shi Shugang said, “You’re flattering me. My skill is like the faint glow of a firefly compared to the sun. What you just said, I am afraid The Eagle Hero would laugh to my face.”

Guo Xiang cast a glance at Yang Guo and said, “Him? He is different. I am talking about other people here.”

Shi Zhongmeng said, “It was a Mongolian Prince called Hou Du. I heard he is the disciple of Jinlun Fawang.”

Yang Guo softly sighed, “It was he. No wonder.”

Guo Xiang said, “Eagle Hero, please punish this Mongolian Prince severely for Third Uncle Shi’s sake.”

Shi Zhongmeng said, “We do not dare to bother the Eagle Hero. As soon as the Third Brother’s injury is cured, we will find him and fight him fair and square. I am sure we won’t be defeated. Only my Third Brother’s internal injury will need a long time to heal; additionally, he will need to drink the blood of the fox for treatment.”

”So that’s the story,” Guo Xiang and the Xishan Ghosts murmured.

Shi Zhongmeng said, “The ‘jiu wei ling hu’ is a rare animal; extremely skittish. We, five brothers have spent almost a year trying to track it down. This fox’s habitat is also in unusual places, like a big marsh located about thirty li [about 15 km] northwest.”

The Killer Ghost asked, “Big marsh? Is it the Black Dragon Marsh?”

Shi Zhongmeng said, “Precisely. You have lived in the Jinnan area for a long time, naturally you know that place. This Black Dragon Marsh’s surrounding area is covered with sludge for a few li around it; no man or beast is able to live there. It’s been a very big effort on our part to simply lure one to this forest.”

The Killer Ghost said, “Oh, no wonder you wouldn’t allow us to enter the forest.”

Shi Zhongmeng continued, “We Shi Brothers are newcomers to this area, naturally we can’t act impolitely. But this is an urgent matter; we did not have any other choice. That fox can run very fast, you have seen it with your own eyes. We led the animals to surround this forest and had actually hoped we would catch it. Unexpectedly you lighted a fire in the forest that our animals were afraid of, and, using that opportunity, the fox escaped. We are ashamed that even with all our might we weren’t able to catch that animal. Once the fox went back to its lair I doubt if we will ever be able to lure it out again. In the meantime my Third Brother’s injury is not getting better. We are running out of time. That was the reason we acted unreasonably.” He then looked at Yang Guo imploringly.

Fan Yiweng said, “We are partly responsible for this mishap. But may I know, how did you lure the fox in the first place? Why can’t we repeat it?”

Shi Zhongmeng said, “The fox is a very suspicious animal; it was extremely difficult to lure it out. We have sacrificed more than a thousand roosters. We put a roasted chicken every day a few feet apart. Only after about two months did its suspicions gradually

subside and we slowly led it to this forest. After this incident, I doubt it would ever fall into our trap again, even in ten years.”

Fan Yiweng nodded, saying, “That is so. But what if we try to capture it in its lair?”

“The Black Dragon Marsh is surrounded by several li of more than ten foot deep sludge. Nothing can step on it, not even a boat or light wooden raft will float. The fox’s body is light, its feet wide and thick, plus it is agile so it can run on the surface,” Shi Zhongmeng explained.

Guo Xiang suddenly remembered her family’s pair of eagles which she and her siblings used to ride in the air. The Divine Eagle is bigger than theirs, capable of carrying two people; hence she said, “Eagle Hero, if you are willing to help, I have a way.”

Yang Guo smiled and said, “The Shi Brothers are animal experts, yet they were not able to catch it, even if I am willing what could I do?”

Shi Zhongmeng heard willingness in his voice. This was a matter of life and death for his brother, so without hesitation he bent his knees and knelt down on the snow in front of Yang Guo and asked, “Eagle Hero, my younger brother’s fate is in your hand. Please help us.” Shi Bowei, Shi Jiqiang and Shi Mengjie also knelt down.

Yang Guo quickly lifted them up and said, “I do not dare.” Then he turned to Guo Xiang, “You said if I am willing then you have a way. I will listen to your respected opinion.”

Guo Xiang said, “You can ride on the Divine Eagle and fly over the marsh.”

Yang Guo laughed heartily, saying, “Ha-ha-ha, my Brother Eagle is different from other birds; his body is too heavy, he can’t fly. His strong wings can sweep tigers or leopards away, but they won’t help him soar.” Still, he turned his head to the Shi Brothers and said, “Even though I am useless, I will try my best to help. I beg your forgiveness if I am inadequate.”

The Shi Brothers were very happy. They knew this well-known hero’s reputation; he would do what he promised to do. And if he couldn’t do it, nobody could. Shi Bowei and his brothers kowtowed and said, “Then we invite the Eagle Hero and the Xishan Ghosts to draw up a plan together at our place.”

Fan Yiweng said, “This trouble was started by our brother. We will listen to you.”

Shi Bowei said, “We don’t dare accuse him. At least we made a few friends out of this.” The Xishan Ghosts and Shi Brothers did not have any enmity to begin with; now that they have agreed on something, each uttered polite words and their enmity was quickly forgotten.

Yang Guo, however, disagreed. “Brothers, let me go directly to the Black Dragon Marsh. No matter if I succeed or fail, I will come and pay my respects to you within five days.” The Xishan Ghosts and the Shi Brothers knew he usually handled matters alone; so even though they wanted to come they did not dare to propose otherwise. Yang Guo lifted his arm in respect and turned around, heading north.

Guo Xiang thought, “I came to see the Eagle Hero and I’ve seen him now. Although he looks ugly, his skills are astonishing and he likes to help those in need; he’s a real hero. So if I am looking for a ‘Da Xia’, I have found one.” She was curious to see how he would catch the fox so she quietly followed him.

The Big Head Ghost was about to call her, but changed his mind at the last moment. “She came to see the Eagle Hero; perhaps she has something to say to him,” he thought. The Shi Brothers did not know Guo Xiang to begin with, so they did not say anything either.

Guo Xiang was following about ten feet behind Yang Guo. However, Yang Guo and the eagle moved faster and faster like a speeding horse; a moment later Guo Xiang was far behind. All she could see was Yang Guo’s sleeve floating in the wind; the distance between them was getting greater and greater. Guo Xiang used her family’s lightness skill with all her might but very soon all she could see was two spots on the horizon. She anxiously cried, “Hey, wait for me!” She lost her concentration and fell onto the snowy ground. She was upset and started to cry.

Suddenly she heard a gentle voice saying, “Why are you crying? Who bullied you?”

Guo Xiang looked up and saw that it was Yang Guo. She did not know how he could get back that fast. She was both surprised and happy, but also embarrassed. She searched for her handkerchief to dry her tears but it was gone. She thought it fell to the ground because she was running frantically.

Yang Guo groped in his sleeve pocket and produced a handkerchief which he held between his thumb and index finger and asked with a smile, “Are you looking for this?” Guo Xiang saw that it was her own embroidered flower handkerchief so she said, “It is you who bully me.”

“How did I bully you?” Yang Guo asked.

“You took my handkerchief away, didn’t you bully me?” Guo Xiang answered.

Yang Guo laughed, “You dropped it yourself and I was kind enough to pick it up for you. How could you say I took it away?”

Guo Xiang also laughed, “I was behind you, so how could you have picked it up? Obviously you took it from me.” Actually Yang Guo was aware that Guo Xiang was following them. He wanted to test her skills; so he intentionally ran faster. He thought this young girl’s martial arts seemed to come from a famous expert. After she fell he was afraid she might be injured, so he took a detour around her and saw a handkerchief several feet behind, so he picked it up.

Yang Guo smiled, “What’s your name? Who’s your master? Why are you following me?”

Guo Xiang countered, “What’s your great name? You tell me first then I’ll tell you.”

Yang Guo had been unwilling to even reveal his face for the past decade, so obviously he was not going to tell a stranger his name. He said, “Young lady, you’re a strange one. If you won’t say it, then never mind. Here’s your handkerchief.” He waved his hand slightly and the handkerchief spread out and flew steadily to Guo Xiang.

Guo Xiang found it fun and took it, saying, “Eagle Hero, what skill is this? Can you teach me?”

Yang Guo saw that she was young and innocent and his repulsive mask did not scare her, so he thought, “I must scare her a bit.” He suddenly said sharply, “You’re very daring. Why aren’t you afraid of me? I’m going to hurt you now.” He stepped forward and raised his hand as if about to strike.

Guo Xiang was shocked but recovered quickly and laughed, “I’m not afraid. If you really want to hurt me, would you say it first? The Eagle Hero is chivalrous and valiant, why would you want to hurt a little girl like me?”

For someone past caring about worldly affairs, even if a great man praised him sincerely, he would not care. Although he was not desperate to be praised, when he heard Guo Xiang earnestly complimenting him, he smiled, “You don’t know me, and how do you know I won’t harm you?”

Guo Xiang said, “Although I don’t know you, I heard a lot about your great deeds at Fenglingdu last night. I said to myself, ‘I must definitely meet such a great hero.’ So I followed the Big Head Ghost here to find you.”

Yang Guo shook his head, “I’m no hero. After you’ve seen me you’ll know that my fame is exaggerated.”

Guo Xiang quickly said, “No, no! If you’re not a hero... then who is?” After she said this she realized she said something wrong – it implied her father was not on the same level as he was. So she said, “Of course there’re several great heroes apart from you, but you’re definitely one of them.”

Yang Guo thought, “You’re just a teenager, how can you know about the great men of the time?” He smiled, “So who are those heroes?”

Guo Xiang felt that his tone was quite dismissive of her statement, so she said, “OK, I’ll say it. But if I’m right, you’ll take me to catch that “Nine-Tailed Fox”, OK?”

Yang Guo said, “OK. Name me a few.”

Guo Xiang said, “OK. There’s one hero who defends Xiangyang and repels the Mongol invaders with all his might to protect the people. Is that a great hero?”

Yang Guo held up his thumb and said, “Correct! Hero Guo Jing can be counted.”

Guo Xiang continued, “There’s also a female hero who protects the people, defends the country, is really intelligent and predicts like the Gods. Is she a great hero?”

Yang Guo said, “You mean Madam Guo – Chief Huang? Hmm... she can be considered a great hero too.”

Guo Xiang said, “There’s also an old hero who’s a master of the Five Elements and the Divine Flicking Finger and is a great prodigy. Is he considered a great hero?”

Yang Guo said, “This must be Island Master Huang, a senior in the Wulin community. I’ve always respected him.”

Guo Xiang saw that he knew the three people she mentioned so she was quite pleased with herself. She said, “Then there’s yet another, he commands the Beggars’ Sect, kills

the mighty enemy, serves the country and the people, and toils laboriously. Is he considered a great hero?”

Yang Guo said, “Are you referring to Chief Lu Youjiao? Although his martial arts are not that fantastic and he never accomplished much, but based on you saying he ‘kills the mighty enemy, serves the country and the people’, he can be counted as a great hero too.”

Guo Xiang thought, “You’re so great yourself and your standards are so high; if I continue then you may not agree. Moreover after Father, Mother, Grandfather and Uncle Lu, I can’t think of anyone else.”

Yang Guo saw her hesitating and thought, “Uncle Guo, Aunt Guo, Island Master Huang and Chief Lu are all very well-known heroes. It’s nothing strange for this young lady to mention them.” He said, “If you can name one more correctly, I’ll take you to the Black Dragon Marsh to catch the “Nine-Tailed Fox”.”

Guo Xiang wanted to mention her brother-in-law Yelu Qi but felt that although his martial arts were high, he did not qualify to be a ‘great hero’ yet. Her martial brothers Wu Dunru and Wu Xiuwen were even worse candidates. She was greatly troubled when she suddenly thought of something and said, “OK, here’s one more: he helps people in trouble, protects the weak and is widely praised – the Eagle Hero! Whether he is to be considered a great hero is for you to decide.”

Yang Guo said, “Young lady, your words are very amusing.”

Guo Xiang said, “So are you taking me to the Black Dragon Marsh?”

Yang Guo laughed, “Since you called me a great hero, how can a great hero disappoint the young lady? Let’s go.”

Guo Xiang was overjoyed and stretched out her hand and held his left hand. She was friendly with the heroes in Xiangyang since young and they treated her like their god-daughter, hence she did not pay attention to the proper behavior between males and females. In her excitement, she did not treat Yang Guo as a stranger.

Yang Guo, feeling his hand being held by her, felt that it was soft and smooth. He was at a loss as to what to do because if he withdrew his hand, it might have seemed rude. He glanced at her and saw her hopping and skipping with joy written all over her face and without any other thoughts, so he smiled and pointed north, saying, “The Black Dragon

Marsh is over there; it's not very far from here.” As he pointed, he managed to take his hand away from Guo Xiang's hold discreetly. Yang Guo was a great flirt when young but after separating from Xiao Longnu, he restrained himself. He paid great attention to the proper behavior between males and females for the past 10 years while roaming Jianghu. Although he saw that Guo Xiang was sweet and innocent, he was still careful with his behavior and did not even dare to touch her hand.

Guo Xiang did not bother about that but walked shoulder-to-shoulder with him. After walking a few steps, she saw that although the Divine Eagle was ugly, it looked proud and majestic, so she stretched out her hand to pat its wings. She'd played with a pair of white eagles since young and patting the eagles' wings as a game. However the Divine Eagle spread its wings and pushed her aside with an “Aak”. Guo Xiang was shocked and exclaimed, “Ah!”

Yang Guo laughed, “Brother Eagle, relax! Why treat this young lady so coldly?” Guo Xiang stuck out her tongue at it and walked to Yang Guo's right, not daring to go near the eagle. She did not know that while her eagles were pets Yang Guo's eagle was sort of his master as well as his friend. Considering its age, it was an elder, so its status was different.

So the two people and the eagle headed towards the Black Dragon Marsh. They found it quite easily as there was no plants or trees for 7 or 8 li. The Black Dragon Marsh was originally a large lake, but the water source dried eventually and it was clogged with slit year after year. As a result, the place became a desolate marsh. With only a bit of effort, Yang Guo and Guo Xiang made it to the marsh. They looked around and saw a heavy cloud of mist with only dried bushes scattered around the vast marsh. The “Nine-Tailed Fox”, should be hiding somewhere around here.

Yang Guo took a twig and threw it into the marsh. At first the twig settled on the snow, but then it sank slowly and steadily without stopping. Soon there was not a trace of the twig. Guo Xiang exclaimed, “The twig is so light and yet it sank, so how can we walk on it?” She stared at Yang Guo and wondered what clever tricks he was thinking of.

Yang Guo broke off two yew branches which were a few feet long and tied them to his feet. He said, “Let me try it and see if this works.” He bent forward and jumped onto the snow, skiing quickly on the surface. He skied left and right without pausing and turned several times on the frozen marsh before returning to his original location.

Guo Xiang laughed, “Great skills!”

Yang Guo saw the glint of admiration in her eyes and knew she was really eager to trap the fox, but she did not have great lightness skills so he laughed, “I promised to take you to the Black Dragon Marsh to catch that “Nine-Tailed Fox”, are you afraid?”

Guo Xiang sighed gently and said, “I don’t have skills such as yours; even if I were very brave it’d be useless.”

Yang Guo smiled without a word and broke off another two branches. He then gave them to Guo Xiang and said, “Tie them to your feet.”

Guo Xiang was surprised and delighted and immediately tied the branches as instructed. Yang Guo said, “Bend forward and remember not to exert any strength with your feet.” He grabbed her arm and shouted, “Fear not!” Guo Xiang was dragged by him and she found herself skiing on the snow. She panicked at first, but after a few meters she felt herself floating like the wind and she repeatedly shouted, “This is so much fun!”

After skiing for some time, Yang Guo suddenly shouted, “Oh!” Guo Xiang asked, “What?” She lost her concentration and her left foot sank into the snow. The mud splashed onto her leg and she exclaimed in surprise. Yang Guo lifted her out and said, “Remember, always move continuously and you must not stop suddenly.”

Guo Xiang said, “OK. What do you see? Is it the ‘Nine-Tailed Fox’?”

Yang Guo said, “No! It seems like someone is living in the middle of the marsh.”

Guo Xiang curiously asked, “How can someone live here?”

Yang Guo said, “I don’t know that either. But the plants and trees here are arranged into some sort of formation; definitely man-made.”

They were getting closer to the formation and Guo Xiang looked carefully, saying, “Correct, Wood at the east, Fire in the south, Earth at the centre but it’s not Water at the North but Metal.”

She had heard her mother talk of the ‘Changes of the Five Elements’ since young so she managed to pick up some of it. Her character was quite different to her sister Guo Fu – she was frank but not uncouth and she was much more intelligent than her sister. Huang Rong always said, “If your grandfather ever saw you, he would really like you a lot.” Huang Yaoshi was very well-versed in medicine, astrology, the arts and warfare.

Guo Xiang was very much like her grandfather but she was distracted easily, so her martial arts improvement was slow. She was always day-dreaming, did as she pleased and her conduct was usually extraordinary, causing Guo Jing and Huang Rong a lot of headaches. Hence her nickname at home was “Little Eastern Heretic”. For example on this occasion she followed the Big Head Ghost whom she did not know to look for the Eagle Hero, and now she followed another stranger, the Eagle Hero, to catch the fox. She boldly did as she wanted and was different from the Huang Rong and Guo Fu of years ago.

When Yang Guo heard that she knew how the formation was arranged, he was quite surprised and asked, “How did you know? Who taught you?”

Guo Xiang laughed, “I saw that in some books, I don’t even know if it’s correct. But from what I see there’s nothing extraordinary about this formation, so it can’t be some expert living in there.”

Yang Guo nodded, “That a person can survive in such an inhospitable place is strange.” So he said loudly, “My friend in the Black Dragon Marsh, you have guests.” After waiting a while, there was still no response. Yang Guo repeated his words but still received no response. Yang Guo said: “Looks as though someone made this formation, but the person doesn’t live here. Let’s go over and take a look.” He skied several meters ahead and went right up to the formation.

Guo Xiang suddenly felt as though she had set foot on solid ground. Yang Guo finished his examination and laughed, “There’s nothing weird about this. There’s an island in the middle of the marsh.” As he said this, there was a sudden movement in the snow and two little foxes came out from behind a bush. It was a pair of “Nine-Tailed Foxes” and one headed northeast while the other headed southwest, both running very fast.

Yang Guo shouted, “Stay here and don’t move.” He turned and chased the fox heading northeast. Now that he didn’t have to look after Guo Xiang, he was able to utilize his full skills and ski on the snow swiftly as a bird. However the fox was extremely fast and agile too and it turned, and then dashed in front of Guo Xiang. Suddenly, as the wind blew, Yang Guo threw out his sleeve and almost caught the fox but it was too agile and somersaulted in midair, causing Yang Guo’s sleeve to miss only by a few inches. Guo Xiang exclaimed, “What a pity!”

The man and the fox dashed through the snow with lightning speed and Guo Xiang was filled with excitement and could not stop cheering Yang Guo, shouting, “Eagle Hero! Faster! Little fox, you can’t escape, just surrender!” The other fox zigzagged around,

sometimes moving close to Yang Guo. Yang Guo knew it was there to distract him so he did not bother with it and only concentrated on the first fox, wanting to tire it out. Although the fox was small, its stamina was excellent and showed no signs of fatigue after dashing around for so long.

Yang Guo increased his pace and the other fox ran alongside its companion in an attempt to save it. He scolded, "You little animal, do you think I can't catch you?" He swiftly bent down and grabbed a ball of snow and squashed it until it was like a stone. He shot the snowball out and hit the fox in the head, causing it to fall down and roll over. Yang Guo did not want to kill it, so he threw the snowball very lightly. The fox rolled several times and stood up again, quickly dashing into a clump of bushes, not daring to come out again.

If Yang Guo hit it again, he could catch the fox, but he purposely wanted to compete with it, saying, "Little fox, if I hit you hard with a snowball, you won't die in peace. I'm an upright man and if I can't catch up with you, I'll let you off." He took a deep breath and launched himself forward, sliding on the snow and got right up to the fox. The fox was shocked and tried to escape to the right. Yang Guo was prepared for that and shot out his sleeve, hitting the fox. He then grabbed its head with his left hand. He felt proud of himself and laughed heartily.

When he stopped laughing, he saw that the fox was motionless and appeared to be dead. Yang Guo thought, "Oh no! My sleeve must have hit it too hard. These foxes are very delicate, I wonder if the dead fox's blood can be used to treat the third Shi." He took the fox and skied to Guo Xiang, saying, "This fox is dead, I'm afraid it's of no use to us, let's go catch the live one." He dropped the fox onto the ground, and as he was afraid it was pretending to be dead, he flung his sleeve out to catch it back if it moved. But the fox remained motionless and seemed to be really dead.

Guo Xiang said, "The fox was cute when alive, maybe it dropped dead from fatigue." She took a branch and said, "I'll go chase the other fox here. You wait here." She walked a few steps forward and hit the bushes with the branch.

When she hit the bushes, she wanted to hit again but could not lift the branch up. It seemed like the branch was being bitten by some animal. She exclaimed in surprise and tugged harder, but she lost her grip and the branch was dragged into the bushes.

With a strange sound a person emerged from behind the bushes; it was an old woman with white hair and dressed in black. She stared at Guo Xiang fiercely and raised the

branch to hit her. Guo Xiang was shocked and immediately jumped back, retreating behind Yang Guo.

At this time the 'dead' fox sprang up and jumped into the old woman's embrace and stared at Yang Guo with its beady eyes. It was feigning death after all.

When Yang Guo saw this, he was angry yet amused. He thought, "Today I lost to a small animal; seems like it belongs to the old woman. I don't know who she is and I've never heard about such a person in Jianghu. It might be a problem if I insist on taking the fox." He lifted his hand and said, "I have offended you, Elder, please forgive me."

The old woman stared at the branches on their feet and appeared surprised. However she quickly masked it and waved her hand, saying, "This old woman lives in seclusion and doesn't entertain any guests. Go away!" Her pitch was sharp and thin and her brows showed traces of an unfriendly aura.

Yang Guo saw that her appearance was intimidating but her brows and eyes were delicate, so it seemed she must have been beautiful when young. He really could not figure out who this could be and said politely, "I have a friend who has suffered some internal injuries. I need the blood of the "Nine-Tailed Fox" to treat him. I hope you will be generous and save a life. My friends and I will be very grateful to you."

The old woman faced the sky and laughed, "Ha-ha ha-ha heh heh." She did not stop for a while and her laughter was filled with hatred. Finally she said, "He has suffered internal injuries, so you need to save him. Wonderful! Why did no one want to save my son when he was severely injured?"

Yang Guo was shocked and said, "What injuries did Elder's son suffer? Can we still save him in time?"

The old woman laughed again. She said, "In time? He died several decades ago and has already turned to ashes, what are you talking about?"

Yang Guo knew she was thinking about her past, so he did not say much. He only said, "Our visit here to request this fox is really inappropriate, if elder has any orders I shall carry them out if they're within my capacity."

The old woman cast a gaze at him and said, "I live here alone and have no kith or kin – only these foxes as companions. If you take them away, it's no problem, but you must leave this girl here to accompany me for ten years."

Yang Guo frowned but before he could answer, he heard Guo Xiang say, “This place is only stinking mud and firewood, it’s no fun here. I don’t want to live here. If you’re bored here, then you may come to my home. My parents will definitely welcome you and you can live with us for ten or twenty years. Isn’t that better?”

The old woman angrily said, “Who do you think your parents are? How can they invite me?” Guo Xiang was very broad-minded and if anyone was rude to her, she would just laugh it off, so she hardly got angry. The woman seriously offended Guo Jing and Huang Rong and if Guo Fu had heard this, she would have flown into a rage immediately. Guo Xiang however just smiled and stuck out her tongue at Yang Guo.

Yang Guo felt this young lady was very familiar and did not wish to bring her trouble. He nodded to her and faced the old woman, saying, “Elder’s invitation to this girl is indeed generous and is a rare opportunity for her but without her parents’ permission, she can’t decide for herself...”

The old woman said sharply, “Who are her parents? What are you to her?” Yang Guo found these questions hard to answer.

Guo Xiang immediately said, “My parents are villagers, even if I tell you, you wouldn’t know them. Him...He’s my... brother!” She looked at Yang Guo.

At this time Yang Guo was also starring at her and they made eye contact. Although Yang Guo was wearing a mask and his face looked dead and zombie-like, his eyes radiated a warm and protective aura. Guo Xiang felt her heart tremble and thought, “If I only had such an older brother, he’d definitely look after me. He won’t be like my sister who nags and scolds all the time, grumbling about this and nitpicking at that.” As she thought of this, her face showed signs of respect.

Yang Guo said, “Yeah, my sister is young and ignorant, so I took her out to see the world...” Guo Xiang was initially afraid that Yang Guo would not acknowledge her as his sister but when she heard this, she was extremely delighted. She heard him continue, “She saw that this “Nine-Tailed Fox” looked so majestic and knew it must be some exalted elder who owns it so she has come with me on this visit. She is really fortunate to meet you.”

The old woman laughed coldly, “What’s the use of talking such rubbish? The way you chased my fox – is that showing respect for an elder? Quickly go and don’t come back!” She waved both palms and thrust one palm at Yang Guo and the other at Guo Xiang. The three of them were standing about a meter apart and although they were out of

range of her palms, Guo Xiang felt a cold wind suddenly rush towards her. Yang Guo waved his sleeve and completely dissipated the wind blowing towards Guo Xiang and did not even bother about the wind blowing towards him.

In the beginning, the old woman was not afraid of them and only wanted to chase them out of the Black Dragon Marsh, so she only used 50% of her strength. But when she saw that it did not affect them in the least bit, she was shocked and angry. She increased her strength and struck out with two palms again, not worrying if she took their lives. Once Guo Xiang felt the wind coming, she felt the chill immediately, but Yang Guo waved his sleeve and dissipated the wind again. She knew they were competing internal strength and she saw that the old woman's expression was terrible while Yang Guo looked calm as he had the upper hand.

The old woman quickly ducked and stepped away, then suddenly lashed out with a strange move, hitting Yang Guo squarely in the chest with a thud. She immediately retreated and did not wait for Yang Guo to retaliate, and was several meters away in a moment. Guo Xiang was shocked and pulled his arm, asking, "Are... are you injured?" The old woman said sharply, "You've been struck by my "Yin Frost Arrow Palm", you won't live to tomorrow. You brought this upon yourself, so don't blame anyone else."

Yang Guo's martial arts had far surpassed this old woman's martial arts even fifteen years ago. Now that he had reached such a high level of internal and external martial arts mastery, the old woman's "Yin Frost Arrow Palm" did not hurt him. However he had no feud with her and he also wanted her precious pet. He did not want to be rude and thus did not retaliate for three palm strikes.

The old woman had trained her "Yin Frost Arrow Palm" for the past two decades and one palm stroke could smash seventeen bricks at once. The shattered pieces did not fly everywhere, showing that her palm strikes were fierce and concentrated. She thought when Yang Guo was hit, he would collapse from his injuries but he smiled as if nothing happened. She thought, "This kid is still stubborn even on the verge of death." She said, "While you're not dead yet, quickly take this girl and leave, don't die in my Black Dragon Marsh."

Yang Guo lifted his head and said clearly, "Elder lives in seclusion and is very knowledgeable." He laughed loudly and clearly, his voice robust and vigorous, showing his profound internal strength.

When the woman heard this, she realized that he was not even slightly injured and her face darkened. It was only now that she knew he had actually allowed three moves and

she was far from his match. She did not wait for him to finish and carried her fox while whistling for the other. The other came out from the bushes and jumped into her embrace. The old woman said sharply, “Martial arts expert, I admire you. But if you want to snatch this old woman’s foxes, never! If you step one foot closer I’ll strangle them and you can return empty-handed.”

Yang Guo heard that her words were resolute and saw that her character was stubborn and unyielding, he hesitated. If he suddenly charged forward and sealed her accupoints before snatching a fox, it looked like she might die from anger. This way, even if he saved Shi Shugang’s life, it would be at the expense of another innocent life.

At this time, they heard a voice from behind. “Amitufo.” Then the voice said, “Old monk Yideng wishes to see you, Yinggu, please meet me.”

Guo Xiang saw that there was no one around her and was very curious. The voice seemed to come from close by but there was nowhere anyone could conceal himself in the surroundings. Where could this person be? She had once heard from her mother that Reverend Yideng was a highly-skilled elder. He had once saved her mother’s life and he was also the master of Wu Santong who was the father of the Wu brothers. She had never met him before, so when someone suddenly called himself Yideng, she was surprised and happy.

When Yang Guo heard Yideng’s voice, he was very delighted too. He knew that Yideng was now using the “Voice Transmitting Over 1000 Li” skill. Of course Yideng was not literally 1000 li away, but if there was no mountain in the way, someone with high martial arts could project his voice over several li and yet sound very near. The higher the internal energy, the gentler the voice would sound. Yang Guo only heard these two sentences and was full of admiration and admitted to himself that this monk’s internal energy was so profound and refined that the monk was superior to him. He then thought, “So this old woman is Yinggu. I wonder what Yideng wants to see her for. Maybe with his intervention I can get the fox.”

The old woman living in the Black Dragon Marsh was indeed Yinggu. Years ago when Yideng was the King of Dali, Yinggu was one of his concubines. She had an affair with Zhou Botong and had a son by him. Later Qiu Qianren used his Iron Palms to injure their son severely but King Duan (Yideng) refused to save the child and he died. Following that King Duan became a monk and took on the name of Yideng. When Yinggu could not kill Qiu Qianren on Mount Hua, she chased Zhou Botong for some time before touring Jianghu and finally settling down in the Black Dragon Marsh. By this time Yideng had been outside the marsh for seven days and transmitted his voice

to seek permission to visit her everyday. However Yinggu remembered how he totally refused to save her son many years ago and her hatred had still not diminished, so she refused to see him.

Yang Guo saw Yinggu retreat a few steps and sit on a pile of firewood. Her eyes were filled with hatred. After a while, they heard Yideng again, saying, “Old monk Yideng has come from a thousand li away, Yinggu, please grant us permission to visit.” Yinggu just played with her foxes and ignored him. Yang Guo thought, “Yideng’s martial arts far surpass hers, so she can’t stop him from coming, so why does he beg her to see him?” They heard Yideng repeat the words once more, then they did not hear him again.

Guo Xiang said, “Brother, this Reverend Yideng must be some great man, can we go see him?”

Yang Guo said, “Yes! I want to see him too.” Then they saw Yinggu stand up and cast her fierce gaze at them and felt uncomfortable. He grabbed Guo Xiang’s hand and said, “Let’s go!” They skied away together.

Guo Xiang was pulled for several feet by Yang Guo. Then she asked, “Brother, where’s Reverend Yideng? When I heard him speak, it’s as though he’s right beside me.”

Yang Guo heard her call him “Brother” twice and her voice was gentle and sweet, his heart shivered and thought, “I must never let her get entangled in the web of love. This girl is young and naïve and inexperienced, so it’s best we split up soon before there’s any trouble.” But they could not stop in such a desolate place and he could not let go of her hand now. Guo Xiang asked, “I’m asking you, didn’t you hear?”

Yang Guo said, “Reverend Yideng is in the northwest and is several li away from here. He can speak from far as though he’s nearby using the “Voice Transmitting Over 1000 Li” skill.”

Guo Xiang happily asked, “You know it too? Can you teach me? When we’re a thousand li apart I can use this skill to communicate with you, won’t that be great?”

Yang Guo laughed, “Although this is the “Voice Transmitting Over 1000 Li” skill, if you can only project your voice over several li, it would indeed be considered excellent. If you want to reach Reverend Yideng’s level, even with your intelligence you’ll only have mastered it when you have white hair.”

Guo Xiang heard that he was praising her for being intelligent, she was overjoyed and said, “How am I intelligent? If I were only 10% as intelligent as my mother, I’d be satisfied.”

Yang Guo’s heart trembled and he saw that her brows resembled Huang Rong’s, so he thought, “Among all the people I’ve met in my life, whether male or female, when it comes to intelligence none can compare to Aunt Guo. Could she really be Uncle and Aunt Guo’s daughter?” But he laughed nonchalantly and thought, “Is there really such a wonderful thing? If she’s really their daughter, Uncle Guo would never let her come out and wander around like this.” He asked, “Who’s your mother?”

Although Guo Xiang said that her parents were great heroes, now she was shy to admit that she was Guo Jing and Huang Rong’s daughter, so she laughed, “My mother is my mother. You wouldn’t know her anyway. Brother, between you and Yideng, whose skills are better?”

Yang Guo was almost a middle-aged man now and he’d experienced the agony of separation from Xiao Longnu, so his proud nature had waned with age. He said, “Reverend Yideng is a famous character in Wulin and his name is as well-known as the Peach Blossom Island. He was the Southern King among the Five Greats, how can I be compared to him?”

Guo Xiang said, “If you were born several decades earlier, then there would be Six Greats: East Heretic, West Poison, North Beggar, Central Divinity and the Eagle Hero. Ah, there’s also Hero Guo and Madam Guo. So there would be Eight Greats.”

Yang Guo could not help it anymore and asked, “You’ve met Hero Guo and Madam Guo before?”

Guo Xiang said, “Of course, they like me a lot. Do you know them personally? After we finish this business, we’ll meet them together, OK?”

Yang Guo had already forgotten the incident in which Guo Fu hacked off his arm, but he could not stop hating Guo Fu for poisoning Xiao Longnu and causing their sixteen-year separation. He blandly said, “Next year, I might visit Hero Guo and Madam Guo, but I must meet my wife first, then I’ll go with her.” When he mentioned Xiao Longnu, he was extremely excited inside.

Guo Xiang suddenly felt his palm become hot and asked, “Your wife must be really beautiful and highly-skilled.”

Yang Guo sighed, “There’s no one else as beautiful as her on Earth. Hmm, I think she has already far surpassed me in terms of martial arts.”

Guo Xiang was full of admiration and said, “Brother, you must take me to meet your wife. Can you promise me that?”

Yang Guo laughed, “Why not? She’ll definitely like you a lot. When the time comes you can call me ‘Brother’.”

Guo Xiang was surprised and asked; “Why not now?” She stopped and her foot sank into the mud again. Yang Guo pulled her out and skied another few meters. Then they saw a man standing some distance away in the snow. His white beard was flowing freely and he was wearing a loose grey robe. It was indeed Yideng. Yang Guo said in a clear voice, “Disciple Yang Guo greets the Reverend.” He dragged Guo Xiang and ran up to him.

He bent his knees as soon as he came near the Reverend.

The place where Yideng stood was beyond the Black Dragon Marsh. Yideng was also very happy and quickly pulled the young man up. “Brother Yang,” he said, “How have you been? I am delighted to see your skill has improved thus far.”

As soon as he stood up, Yang Guo saw another monk lying on the ground behind the Reverend. The monk’s face was sheet white and his eyes were closed; he looked like a corpse. After looking at him for a moment he recognized the monk as Ci’en. He was surprised and asked “What happened to Reverend Ci’en?”

Yideng heaved a heavy sigh. “He has been injured by an enemy and my efforts to help him were in vain,” he said.

Yang Guo quickly checked Ci’en’s pulse and found it was very weak. He knew that Ci’en would have been dead if he did not possess profound internal energy. “Reverend Ci’en has a very high level of martial arts. Your disciple is puzzled as to how could he be injured that badly?”

“For a long time he and I lived a secluded life in Hunan province,” explained Yideng. “A while ago we heard that, because they were not successful in taking over Xiangyang, the Mongolians had turned their attention to the south. They attacked Da Li with the intention of using it as a stepping stone to attack the central plains from both north and south. Because he saw my concern about the safety of my homeland, Ci’en went out to

investigate. Unexpectedly he met an enemy and was engaged in a battle for one whole day and night. As a result he suffered a heavy injury.”

Yang Guo stomped his feet. With a sigh he said “Jinlun Fawang has come back to the central plains,” he said.

“Big Brother, how did you know the enemy was Jinlun Fawang? Reverend Yideng did not say it was him,” asked Guo Xiang.

“I guessed it was Jinlun Fawang because the Reverend said they were battling each other for one whole day and night,” he answered. “From what the Reverend said, Ci’en was not injured by some kind of trickery and the number of people who can do that is only a handful. Among those people, Jinlun Fawang is the only one.”

“Big Brother,” Guo Xiang said, “Please find that man and avenge Senior Monk.”

At that moment Ci’en slowly opened his eyes. He looked at Guo Xiang and shook his head. “What is it? You don’t want revenge?” asked the girl. “Ha! You worry that Big Brother will lose?”

“Little Miss has guessed incorrectly,” Yideng said. “My disciple has committed many crimes in the past. He had repented of his past sins and done so many good deeds to repay those sins. There is only one thing disturbing his heart. Without resolution he will die with regrets. He doesn’t want revenge; he doesn’t want his enemy’s demise. All he wants is someone’s forgiveness. Then he will close his eyes in peace.”

“Does he want the forgiveness of that granny who lives in the middle of the marsh?” asked the girl. “That granny is so hardhearted. She won’t easily forgive you if you offended her.”

Yideng again heaved a heavy sigh. “That’s true,” he said. “We have camped out here for seven whole days and nights. She still has not responded!”

Yang Guo was surprised. He suddenly remembered the granny mentioned something about her child, whom she said was injured but nobody was willing to help. “Is this about the death of a child?” he asked.

Yideng slightly shivered. “So Brother Yang knows,” he said.

“Disciple does not know the details,” said Yang Guo. “I said that because the granny mentioned it.” He proceeded by narrating the reason for his visit to the Black Dragon Marsh and his conversation with the granny.

“She was my wife, her name is Yinggu,” said Yideng softly. “She has a very strong character ...” he sighed “If this situation persists, Ci’en won’t be able to hold on.”

Yang Guo sighed and sadly said, “Who has never done anything wrong? Whenever somebody repents, all could be forgotten. Yinggu is rather shortsighted.”

Seeing Ci’en was nearing his end, Yang Guo’s valiant character was stirred. “Reverend, by ignoring my meager ability, I would like to force her to come out,” he said. “Will you allow me?”

Yideng thought for a moment, “Ci’en and I have come this far to ask Yinggu’s forgiveness. We can’t force her, but we have been here a long time without meeting her and looks like our effort will be in vain. If this Yang Guo has any ideas, we might as well try them. Worst case is we still cannot meet her.” So finally he said, “If Brother Yang could persuade her to come out, I would be delighted. But in your efforts, I wish for you not to cause any trouble and worsen this already deep hatred.”

Yang Guo nodded and took a handkerchief and tore it into four pieces. He put two pieces in Ci’en’s ears and gave the other two to Guo Xiang; signaling her to put them in her ears. Guo Xiang understood and immediately did as she was told.

Yang Guo then exerted his internal energy and gathered his ‘chi’ in his ‘dan tian’. [The ‘dan tian’ is somewhat below the navel and between the kidneys. It’s somewhere in the centre of the cross-section of the body. All the ‘chi’ arises from this central point].

He bowed in front of Yideng and said, “Disciple will show off my lack of ability, I hope Reverend won’t laugh at me.”

Yideng clasped his hands and said, “Not many people in this world can match Brother Yang’s skill. This old monk has long wanted to see it.”

Yang Guo put his hand on his waist, looked up, and he shouted loud and long. The shout was loud and sharp, slowly becoming unbearable. It was like earth shattering thunderbolts. Even though her ears were stopped, Guo Xiang’s heart pounded and her face paled. Not too long after there came a sound like the waves of the tide, continuously

crashing onto the shore. One after another, the next one was louder than the previous one.

“Big Brother, stop! I can’t take it any longer!” shouted Guo Xiang. But her cries were overcome by Yang Guo’s cry so that she could not even hear her own voice. She felt like her spirit was snatched out and her body was swaying. At that time she suddenly felt Yideng holding her hand and out of his hand came a warm energy flowing into her body. Guo Xiang understood Yideng was helping her with his profound internal energy. Therefore, she quickly exerted her own energy and calmed her perturbed heart. A moment later her heart was steadied and her mind cleared.

After the time needed to eat a bowl of rice Yang Guo’s voice had not weakened. On the contrary, the intensity was increased. Yideng was very impressed, because he had not achieved that level when he was Yang Guo’s age.

In the time it took to light a joss stick a black shadow came out of the Black Dragon Marsh; immediately Yang Guo shook his sleeve and stopped the roar.

“Emperor Duan,” a voice was heard. “You are too much! You forced me to come out. What do you want?”

“It wasn’t me. It was Brother Yang’s voice,” said Yideng.

While still speaking the shadow kept coming near and when it stopped, all could see that it was Yinggu.

She looked puzzled. “Is that true, that there is someone besides Emperor Duan who possesses internal energy that profound?” she asked in her heart. “Even though he is wearing a mask, I can tell from his hair that he is only thirty-something. It’s amazing for him to reach this level.”

She was forced to come out of her lair by the loud roar. She realized that if she refused, the roar would get louder and she will be heavily injured, possibly her nervous system ruined. So even though she was irritated, she had to comply. Little did she know that the roar came out of Yang Guo’s throat.

After calming herself she turned to Yang Guo and coldly said, “Take my fox. I admit defeat. But I want you to leave immediately.” She lifted the fox by the scruff of its neck and gave it to Yang Guo.

“Hold a moment,” Yang Guo said. “The fox can wait. Reverend Yideng wants to talk to you. Please listen to him.”

Yinggu looked coldly at Yideng. “Very well, I await the Emperor’s decree.”

“Let bygones be bygones,” said Yideng. “Why do you still use that term? Yinggu, do you know him?” He pointed to Ci’en who was still lying on the ground.

Ci’en was wearing a monk’s robe. His face had changed much from the Mount Hua [Huashan] Sword Meet of 30 years ago. Yinggu looked at him for a minute and then said, “How would I know this monk?”

“Who hurt your son then?” Yideng asked.

The granny’s body shuddered, her fair countenance turned red, and from red it turned back to white. “That scoundrel Qiu Qianren,” she answered. “Even if he’s turned into dirt I will still remember him.”

“It has been decades yet you have not rid your heartache.” Yideng sighed. “This man is none other than Qiu Qianren. You don’t recognize his face any longer, but your heart is still full of hatred.”

Yinggu leaped and stretched her fingers like claws, she was going to pierce Ci’en’s breast. Before her hands reached their target, she looked at him again. That face only slightly resembled the Qiu Qianren that she knew. He was lying motionless, no different than a corpse. “If he really is Qiu Qianren, why did he want to see me?” she asked doubtfully.

“He is indeed Qiu Qianren,” explained Yideng. “He repented his great and many sins, shaved his head and became my disciple. His Buddhist name is Ci’en.”

The granny snorted. “Great sinners always think they can redeem their sins by becoming a monk,” she said.

“You are wrong,” said Yideng patiently. “Sin is sin. By becoming a monk he is still a sinner. But he is heavily injured and is dying. He remembered his sin toward you in the past. He knew he injured your child and his heart is troubled; if he doesn’t see you, he won’t die peacefully. Therefore, enduring his pain, we have come from thousands of li away to ask for your forgiveness.”

The granny looked at Ci'en for a long time. Her eyes shone with unleashed hatred. Guo Xiang was really frightened. Slowly the granny lifted her hands up to hit Ci'en. Even though Guo Xiang was scared, her valiant heart prevailed. "Stop it!" she shouted. "He is heavily injured. It's not proper for you to hit him."

Yinggu coldly laughed. "Not proper?" she asked. "He murdered my child and made me suffer for tens of years. Right now – even though it is a bit late, I have a chance for revenge. Not proper? What do you mean 'not proper'?"

"He has repented and regretted his sins," said the girl. "Why do you insist?"

Yinggu looked up and laughed maniacally. "Child, don't talk rubbish!" she snapped. "What would you do if he killed your child?"

"I ... I ... I don't have a child," Guo Xiang stammered.

The granny made a noise with her nose. "What if he killed your husband, your lover ... your big brother? What would you do?" she asked again.

Guo Xiang blushed. "You talk rubbish," she said, "Where did my husband or my lover come from?"

Yinggu was seething with anger. She ignored the girl and lifted her hands again to hit her archenemy's head. Suddenly Ci'en sighed and opened his eyes. A smile formed on his lips. "Thank you Yinggu, for helping me."

The granny was stunned, her hands stopped mid-air. "Help you what?" she barked. But then she realized Ci'en's intention. She now knew that the monk was dying, he wanted it finished by her hands. 'An eye for an eye'... He would pay his old debt.

Yinggu then coldly laughed. "Hmm! How could you die that easy?" she said. "Now I don't want to kill you, yet I don't want to forgive you either!" That word left her mouth with such a cruelty that all who heard her shivered.

Yang Guo was certain that, as a monk, Reverend Yideng would not use force against his ex-concubine who was mad with anger. Guo Xiang was still too young to be regarded by the granny. He was the only one who could do something, anything. He thought for a moment and then said, "Senior Yinggu, I do not know the details of your enmity toward Ci'en. But I can tell from your words that you are a little bit too involved. Therefore, whether I want it or not, I'll have to intervene."

Yinggu was startled and looked at Yang Guo with flame in her eyes. She recalled her three failed attacks, and she recalled his magnificent roar. She realized her skill was not on par with the Eagle Hero, who, judging from his words, would resort to force against her. She also remembered her suffering. From anger she turned sad, and then sobbed uncontrollably.

Yang Guo and Guo Xiang, even Yideng, were perplexed; they didn't understand why the granny cried. A little while later she said, still sobbing: "You! You wanted to see me and I ignored you, but you used force against me. But that person is not willing to see me and none of you care about it."

"Who?" asked Guo Xiang quickly, "Who doesn't want to see Senior? We can help you."

"You can only bully women," said Yinggu. "But you are afraid to meet a highly skilled pugilist."

"I am indeed useless," said the girl. "But with Reverend Yideng and Big Brother here, we are not afraid of anything."

After thinking for a while, Yinggu stood up. "If you can bring him to see and talk to me, I will do whatever you want me to do," she said. "You want a fox, you want me to make peace with Qiu Qianren, whatever."

"Big Brother," Guo Xiang turned to Yang Guo. "What do you think?"

"Whom do you want to see? Why is it so difficult?" asked Yang Guo.

"Ask him," said the granny, pointing to Reverend Yideng.

For an instant Guo Xiang thought the granny was blushing. She was surprised and asked in her heart, "She is this old, yet she is still shy?"

Realizing Yang Guo and Guo Xiang were looking at him, Reverend Yideng softly said, "It was the Old Urchin, Brother Zhou Botong."

"The Old Urchin?" Yang Guo asked. He was delighted. "I know the old man well. Very well, I will try to find him."

"My name is Yinggu," the granny said. "You have to tell him up front that the person who wants to see him is me. If not, he will run away as soon as he sees me; and if that

happens, don't ever think of finding him again. If you succeed, I will do whatever you want me to."

Yideng was shaking his head. Yang Guo saw that, and realized what he'd got himself into. He guessed that there must be an unusual affair between Yinggu and the Old Urchin that made the old man unwilling to see her. But he also knew that Zhou Botong was capricious and loved to play. Yang Guo hoped to somehow trick him. And so he asked, "Where is the Old Urchin? Does Senior know?"

"If you walk for about two hundred li (around 100km) north, you will arrive at a valley. It's called the 'Hundred-Flower Valley' [bai hua gu]," explained the granny. "He hid himself in the valley, spending his days keeping bees."

Hearing the words 'keeping bees' Xiao Longnu immediately came into Yang Guo's mind. He remembered that sixteen years ago Zhou Botong had learned how to keep the Jade Bees from his wife. Because of this thought tears welled up in his eyes. "Very well," he said. "Junior will try to find him. Please wait here." Having said that he asked a clearer direction to the valley and immediately set foot. Guo Xiang followed behind him.

"You'd better stay here," whispered Yang Guo. "That grandpa has a very high martial arts skill, and he is kindhearted too. You can use this opportunity to ask him for a lesson or two. I believe you will gain tremendous advantage for the rest of your life."

"No, I want to come with you to see Zhou Botong," said the girl.

Yang Guo frowned. "Ah, you are wasting a golden opportunity," he said, regret in his voice.

"After we see Zhou Botong, I can go home alone if you have to go someplace else," said Guo Xiang, "But for now, let me come with you."

Yang Guo was touched. "Ah! If only I had a little sister like her, I wouldn't feel so lonely roaming Jianghu," he said in his heart. He smiled and said, "You didn't have any sleep last night. Aren't you tired?"

"I am, but I still want to come," she answered.

"Very well," said Yang Guo, grabbing her hand. Utilizing their lightness kungfu they ran to the north.

With Yang Guo pulling her along, Guo Xiang felt she could run faster without using too much energy. “If only I could run this fast without your help,” she said, laughing.

“Your kungfu base is excellent. If you keep training, you will reach this level someday,” said Yang Guo. Suddenly he looked up and shouted. The girl was startled, but then she understood. He was calling his bird. “Brother Eagle,” Yang Guo said, “We need to go north for some business. You’d better come along.” Whether the bird understood his words or not he chirped and followed behind them.

About one li later the eagle ran faster and even with Yang Guo pulling her, Guo Xiang could not keep up. The eagle lost its patience. He bent his knees to make his body shorter. Yang Guo chuckled and said, “Brother Eagle wants to carry you. Say ‘thank you’ to him.”

Guo Xiang did not dare to be disrespectful toward the Divine Eagle. She bowed in reverence and then mounted the bird’s back. The eagle immediately stretched his legs and ran like the wind; Guo Xiang felt like the trees along the way, were dancing past them. Yang Guo exerted his energy and ran alongside them. He talked and told Guo Xiang what he knew about the places they were passing. The girl was ecstatic! She had never experience this much fun. She wished in her heart the eagle would not run too fast so that she could enjoy the ride longer.

About midday they had run for two hundred li. By following Yinggu’s direction they entered a path way between two hills. Beyond this path they found a very beautiful valley. It was beautiful because it was full of colorful flowers. They slowed down and walked leisurely. In between the flower bushes they could see ponds with water clear as the sky. They felt like the place was out of this world.

Guo Xiang clapped her hands and exclaimed, “The Old Urchin is so lucky. How could he find a place this beautiful? Big Brother, how could this place be so pretty?”

“This place is facing south, so the mountains act as a barrier to the cold north wind,” explained Yang Guo. “Besides, I think there are sulfur or other mineral springs underground, and that is why the ground is warmer so spring comes early. While other places are still covered with snow, the flowers are already blooming here.”

Guo Xiang slid down from the eagle’s back and said, “Brother Eagle, many thanks to you.” Then she walked side-by-side with Yang Guo entering the valley. After a few turns they saw a couple of stone walls on each side of the path, with three pine trees in between, forming two natural gates. As soon as they came near the gates, they heard

buzzing sounds and saw thousands of Jade Bees flying around amidst the trees and flowers.

Yang Guo knew Zhou Botong must be around, so he called, “Old Urchin! Your younger brother Yang Guo and little sister have come to visit you and play.”

If we look at the proper level, Yang Guo was actually three levels below the old man. He should have called ‘Great Grand Martial Master’, but he knew that the old man did not care much about ‘propriety’ and might not like to be called ‘Great Grand Martial Master’; therefore, he called him ‘Old Urchin’.

A moment later an old man came out from one of the gates. Yang Guo was startled. He had not seen Zhou Botong for more than ten years. He thought he would see an old man with white hair and beard. Contrary to his thought, Zhou Botong’s face had not changed a bit, and his hair and beard had more black than white. In short, Yang Guo saw a younger Zhou Botong!

As soon as he saw Yang Guo, the old man laughed heartily. “Brother Yang, what business do you have with me? Aha! You are wearing a mask to scare me off?” Having said that his hand moved toward Yang Guo’s left side to snatch his mask. Yang Guo lifted up his right shoulder a little bit and slanted his head to the left. Zhou Botong’s attack fell to an empty space. The old man was surprised, but he laughed and shouted, “Little Brother! Good! You are really good! I did not reach your level when I was your age.”

In that short encounter both experts had exchanged their skills. Zhou Botong’s snatch, while it looked like an ordinary snatch, had actually blocked Yang Guo’s movement. Even if he were to leap back, he shouldn’t be able to elude that attack. If it were not Yang Guo, the opponent would parry the attack with another attack. But Yang Guo had used a more sophisticated move. When he lifted his right shoulder up, his right sleeve made a move like it was going to attack Zhou Botong’s chest. As an expert Zhou Botong could see the move and readied himself to fend off the attack. Because his concentration was now split, his snatching power was reduced so Yang Guo was able to neutralize Zhou’s snatching by merely slanting his head a little bit. Guo Xiang was inexperienced; she could not see the exchange between these two experts. But she was delighted to hear the old man praising her big brother. “Grandpa Zhou,” she said, “Tell me, is your skill higher now than when you were younger, or the other way around?”

“When I was young, my hairs were white, but now my hairs are black,” he answered, grinning. “Of course my skill is much higher now than when I was younger.”

“If you can’t beat my big brother now, how you could beat him then?” said the girl.

Zhou Botong was not offended, he laughed and said, “Little girl, don’t speak rubbish!” Suddenly his hands flew toward Guo Xiang’s back and waist. He lifted her up to the air, spun her around, threw her up in the air, held her back and slowly put her back on the ground.

His mischievousness had angered the Divine Eagle. Suddenly the eagle swept at Zhou Botong with its wings. Zhou Botong saw the wings’ attack and said to himself: “Let me try this winged beast’s strength.” He exerted his energy and fended off with both hands. Crash! Two formidable forces collided. The old man was still standing and the eagle’s wings passed his side. The eagle was about to attack again when Yang Guo suddenly shouted, “Brother Eagle, don’t be rude! We are in the presence of a highly skilled senior.”

The eagle halted his attack and stood proudly still. “His strength is indeed formidable, no wonder he is so arrogant,” said the Old Urchin, laughing heartily.

“Brother Eagle is more than a hundred years old. He is much older than you are,” said Yang Guo. “Uh, Old Urchin, how did you become young again and your hairs turned black?”

The old man laughed heartily. “My hairs and beard have their own will; I cannot control them,” he said. “From black they turned white, and now turned back to black again.”

Guo Xiang giggled hearing his foolhardy answer. “Old Urchin, I think you are going to turn to a young boy,” she said. “After you shrink to a young boy then people will pat your head and call you ‘little brother’. It will be fun!”

Hearing that the old man was worried and he stood staring blankly. Actually, there were a couple of real reasons behind this change of hair color. First, he was always happy, his body was healthy, and his internal energy was profound. Second, he ate a lot of energy-booster foods like Poria mushroom filaments [Fu Ling], Jade Bee’s honey, and the like. But probably the main reason was simply because his body was different from average people; even though his age was close to a hundred, he was not getting weaker, but on the contrary, he was getting stronger.

Listening to their conversation Yang Guo had an idea. “Brother Zhou,” he said. “If you agree to see someone, I guarantee you won’t get smaller.”

“Who...Who?” he asked hastily.

“Before I tell you, you have to promise me one thing,” Yang Guo answered, “You have to promise you won’t run away as soon as I mention this person’s name.”

The Old Urchin Zhou Botong was capricious and naïve, but he was not stupid. If he were, how could he reach such a high level in the martial realms? Therefore, as soon as he heard what Yang Guo said, he deduced correctly. “In this whole wide world there are two people I do not dare to see,” he said. “The first one is Emperor Duan; the other is Concubine Yinggu. Other than these two, I am not afraid of anybody else.”

“Looks like I’ll have to provoke him,” Yang Guo thought. So he said, “You do not dare to see them because you were defeated at their hands.”

“No, it’s not like that,” the old man contradicted. “Old Urchin sinned against them; that was why I don’t have face to see them.”

Yang Guo was surprised. Now he understood why the old man acted like he did. Yang Guo tried approaching from a different direction. “They are in grave danger and their lives are threatened,” he said. “Do you have the heart not to do anything?”

Zhou Botong was shocked. He loved and respected Yideng and Yinggu very much. If they were in trouble, he wouldn’t hesitate to help up to the point of sacrificing his own life. However, he saw Guo Xiang was smiling, and her countenance did not show any sorrow. He realized Yang Guo’s trick and laughed heartily. “Are you trying to trick me?” he asked. “Emperor Duan has a very high level of martial arts. How could he be in grave danger? Even if he is facing a formidable enemy and he lost, do you think I could win?”

Yang Guo didn’t know what to do. “All right, let me just tell you the truth,” he said. “Yinggu has been thinking about you, she wants to see you and talk with you.”

The old man’s face changed abruptly. “Brother Yang!” he snapped. “If you mention that name one more time, you’ll have to leave ‘bai hua gu’. Don’t blame me if I don’t make an exception.”

Even though he had been through a lot of things, Yang Guo was still a proud man. He waved his sleeve and with a loud voice said, “Brother Zhou, I don’t think you’ll easily achieve your desire to drive me out of this valley.”

“Huh! Huh! Do you want to fight with me?” asked the old man.

“Yes, I want to ask a lesson or two from you,” he answered. “Let us make a bet: if I lose, I will leave this valley without further ado. But if you lose, you’ll have to see Yinggu.”

“No! Can’t be!” shouted the Old Urchin. “First, how could I lose to a kid? Second, if I did, I still don’t want to see Concubine Liu.”

“Aren’t you ashamed?” asked Yang Guo irritated. “If you win, you are free not to see her, but if you lose, you still don’t want to see her, what kind of bet is that?”

“Just shut your mouth up!” snapped the old man. “I don’t want to see her, I am not going too. Protect yourself!”

This time the Eagle Hero was really dumbfounded. He could not be persuaded, he could not be forced. If they really fight, Yang Guo didn’t have any confidence of victory. He stood there blankly, uncertain of what to do.

As we know, Zhou Botong was crazy about martial arts. Even when he lived alone at the “Hundred-Flower Valley” he trained everyday. He always wanted to find a sparring partner; however, with his high level of martial arts, where could he find a suitable match? Therefore, seeing Yang Guo was willing to spar with him, he was itchy to start the fight. Without wasting a single moment Zhou Botong cried, “Watch out!” and started the fight with his “Vacant Fist”. Yang Guo parried with a palm but felt there was something wrong with the power of the fist; it seemed as if it wasn’t there. He considered using soft palms as a response but decided against it, as it would be too risky so he used hard palms even though it wouldn’t match. He used the palm techniques that he developed over the years against the tide’s waves. Three stances later, flower petals were flying around everywhere and after another three, branches from trees fell. At first Yang Guo was worried that Zhou would not be able to take his fierce and overbearing palm because of his advanced age. He withdrew the power from his palm as soon as he sent it out, but after six stances, Yang Guo knew Zhou’s internal energy was very profound and so did not hold anything back. The “Vacant Fist’s” ingenuity was above the martial arts that he was using.

“Good! You are very good!” shouted Zhou Botong. “This is a match I have always wanted.”

The perimeter of their forces was getting larger as the fight progressed, which forced Guo Xiang to step back. The eagle stayed close to Yang Guo, protecting its breast with its

left wing while the right wing was a little bit open. The eagle understood the fierceness of this match and it never took its piercing gaze from Yang Guo, ready to step in if Yang Guo had any trouble.

After a while, Zhou had used all seventy-two stances of his “Vacant Fist”. He had the advantage of better technique but his internal energy could not compare with the overbearing and boundless force of Yang Guo. With eyes open wide Guo Xiang watched these two people exchanging blows. She knew they weren’t fighting as enemies; still, a fight between two highly skilled martial artists was very unpredictable. The slightest mistake could mean death. Cold sweat poured out of her body.

After seeing his “Vacant Fist” could do nothing to Yang Guo, he secretly praised him and then suddenly changed stances and used his left-right technique to fight. His left and right hands used different fist techniques, so that suddenly, Yang Guo was fighting against two Zhou Botongs.

Yang Guo was already at a disadvantage when it was one hand versus two, now it became even more so. One time, when Xiao Longnu fought Jinlun Fawang, she had just learned the “Dividing Ones Mind” skill from Zhou. When the couple met again, Yang Guo had lost his right arm. Xiao Longnu was afraid she might make him sad, so she did not say anything about the technique. Yang Guo was slightly alarmed and could only increase the power in his palm and used his sleeve to take some of the attacks.

As somebody who had trained in martial arts since she was little, Guo Xiang did not understand the fist techniques being exchanged, but she could see who had gained the upper hand and who was having difficulty. She was flustered. Then Guo Xiang remembered her father’s lesson on the ‘Dividing Ones Mind’ skill, which he demonstrated before Guo Polu and herself. She saw what Zhou Botong was doing and it looked to her he was using her father’s skill. She wasn’t sure whether her father learned the skill from this old man, or the other way around. Anyway, she saw an opportunity to give Yang Guo a hand, so she shouted, “Old Urchin! Stop! Not fair! Big Brother does not want to fight you anymore!”

Surprised, Zhou Botong leaped back. “Why not fair?” he snapped. “You stole that skill from my father and used it against Big Brother,” she answered. “Aren’t you ashamed?”

After hearing the young girl called Yang Gou ‘Big Brother’ naturally Zhou Botong thought she was Yang Guo’s younger sibling. And because he did not know Yang Guo’s father, he only laughed and said, “This skill was my own invention. How could you say I stole it from your father?”

“Fine,” said the young Miss. “Even if what you said was true, you still used two arms, while Big Brother only has one. Is that fair? If my Big Brother had two arms, you would’ve been beaten a long time ago.”

“What you said is true,” the old man confessed. “But I am sure that even if he had two arms; he still could not use this skill of mine.” Then he laughed jovially.

Guo Xiang grunted. “Shame on you!” she mocked, “You just said that because you know Big Brother’s arm cannot re-grow. If you are a valiant man (ying xiong), you wouldn’t take any advantage of your opponent’s disability.”

“Fine... In that case I am going to use only a one fist technique,” said the old man.

Guo Xiang stuck out her tongue. “Still shame on you, still unfair, because you use two arms against Big Brother’s one,” she snickered.

“Darn it!” shouted the old man, annoyed. “What should I do then? Shall I ask a woman to chop off one of my arms?”

Guo Xiang was startled, “Which woman had chopped off Big Brother’s arm?” she wondered in her heart. Then she smiled and said, “It’s OK then. You don’t have to chop off your arm. It would be fair if you just tie up one arm and fight Big Brother using only the other one.”

The Old Urchin laughed a big laugh. He thought that this way of fighting would be fun. Besides, he thought that he wouldn’t necessarily lose even if he is using a single arm. So he placed his right hand in his belt prepared to fight. He said, “Come now! This way you will not regret it even if you lose.”

When Zhou Botong and Guo Xiang were having their debate, Yang Guo didn’t say anything. He was never afraid others would mock him because of his disability. On the contrary, he was proud because with only one arm he could beat anybody. Therefore, he was slightly miffed when he saw Zhou Botong do this because he felt he was looking down on him. “Old Urchin!” he said, “By doing that you are looking down on me. Aren’t you thinking that a one-armed Yang Guo couldn’t beat you? Huh! If I lose, I would immediately ...” Lashing his anger out, he was going to say that he would immediately kill himself right then and there. But suddenly he remembered his upcoming rendezvous with Xiao Longnu. He stopped before finishing his sentence.

Guo Xiang regretted her words. She was childishly thinking that she was doing Yang Guo some good. She did not remember that Yang Guo was a Chivalrous Hero (Da Xia), therefore, he would not want anybody to look down on him. Quickly she approached Yang Guo and said, “Big Brother, my mistake ...” and then she came to the old man and took his arm out of the belt. She said, “Old Urchin, with his single arm Big Brother will defeat you. If you don’t believe me, go ahead and try.”

Without waiting for his answer, Yang Guo leaped and chopped out a left palm. Zhou replied with a left fist and didn’t use his right arm. He felt it was unfair to use both arms.

Twenty stances passed. Yang Guo was upset since even with one arm the Old Urchin was not easy to defeat. The ‘yang’ness [from yin-yang: yin – soft, cold, yang – hard, hot] in Zhou’s fist and palms gradually surfaced. This type of energy was opposite to Zhou Botong’s ‘yin’ energy of the “Vacant Fist” technique. Yang Guo noticed the change and suddenly recognized the “Demon Subduing Fist” of the “Nine Yin Manual” in the tomb. Yang Guo shouted, “What’s so special about the ‘Demon Subduing Fist’? Use two hands and take my ‘Melancholic Sad Palms [An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang].

Zhou was shocked; one, Yang Guo actually knew what technique he was using and two, what in the world was ‘An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang’? Zhou was knowledgeable in the martial arts from the various sects of the world but he had never heard of this martial art before. He looked at Yang Guo and saw him with his arm bent, his eyes seemingly far away. His legs seemed to float and his front was completely open – his form contradicted martial arts norms. Zhou went forward to test him out and threw a fist towards Yang Guo’s stomach.

He was afraid that he would hurt his opponent so he only put thirty percent power in his fist. Just as his fist was about to make contact, Yang Guo’s stomach and chest contracted and then extended outwards. Zhou leapt back in shock – skilled fighters contracting their bodies to avoid attacks was fairly normal but he has never seen someone use their chest and stomach to actually attack someone. He was utterly surprised and shouted, “Uh, what kind of technique was that?”

“This was An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang’s thirteenth stance, ‘Muscles Jumping with the Frightened Heart’ [Xin Jing Rou Tiao],” came the answer.

“Huh? I’ve never...never heard of such technique before,” he said.

“Of course you haven’t,” said Yang Guo, “I developed this ‘An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang’ myself. This technique has seventeen stances.”

As we remember, after being separated from Xiao Longnu at the ‘Broken Heart Cliff’, with the eagle’s encouragement, he trained against the tide’s waves. Apart from gradually strengthening his internal energy, he practiced no new martial arts. He couldn’t forget his wife and as time passed, he was more and more depressed from loneliness. One day while walking by the sea, out of boredom he started to throw a few fists and kicks about. By now, his internal energy was at a very high level – anything he threw out contained great power. One of his light palms landed on a turtle’s back and smashed its shell. From then on, he developed a complete set of palm techniques that were completely different from conventional martial arts. The palms relied on internal energy and not on complicated fist techniques.

Yang Guo had learned various first class martial arts from several experts since his childhood. From the Quanzhen, he learned the purest nei-gong techniques. From Xiao Longnu, he learned the “Jade Maiden Sword and Palm” techniques. From the manual inscribed on the Ancient Tomb’s walls, he learned the “Nine Yin Manual”. From his adopted father, Ouyang Feng, he inherited the ‘Toad Stance’ and the ‘Reversing Blood Flow’ techniques. From Hong Qigong he got the ‘Dog Beating Stick’, from Huang Yaoshi he received the “Divine Flicking Finger” and “Jade Flute Swordplay”. Except for the “Solitary Yang Finger” from the Southern Emperor, it could be said that he had mastered the specialty of the Eastern Heretic, Western Poison, Northern Beggar and the Central Divinity. By analyzing and combining these various techniques, it was not too difficult for him to create a brand new fist technique.

Because he had one arm, he did not try to achieve victory with variations in stances but instead he deliberately chose to go against martial arts norms. Also, the names of this palm technique came from a line in one of Jiang Yan’s works (a poet of the Southern Dynasties). This was the first time that the palms have met such a strong opponent as Zhou Botong.

Zhou Botong became even more excited when he heard this was a palm that Yang Guo had invented himself and said, “Good! I want to see this brand new technique.” He continued to fight – with one hand. Yang Guo faced the sky as if he didn’t even notice that Zhou was there and arched a palm towards his face and then downwards. The palm’s power dispersed all around.

Zhou knew that there was no way to avoid the palm’s power and sent out his palm to meet it. The palms collided and Zhou wobbled; he felt his chest tighten – his martial

arts were not weaker than his opponent's but palm for palm, he could not compete with Yang Guo's heavy and overbearing palm. "Good!" he praised, "What was that stance?"

"It was 'Causing One to Worry' or 'Overbearing Sadness' [Gei Ren Yau Tien]." Yang Guo called out, "Watch out! The next stance is 'Out of Nothing Came Something' [Wu Zhong Sheng You]."

The Old Urchin laughed heartily, "Interesting! Very interesting!" he shouted, "Kid, how did you come up with those weird names?"

Yang Guo hung his arm down in a completely unprepared form. As soon as Zhou's fist came near him, Yang Guo suddenly moved everything; his left palm, right sleeve, kicks, head, butt, even his chest, back, stomach and waist attacked – they all contained a level of energy capable of injuring an opponent.

Zhou could never predict a move such as this. In a flash, over ten different stances came at him at once. 'Out of Nothing' was one stance but it contained tens of variations within. Even someone with martial arts as high as Zhou's, he was forced to step back. In this situation, he couldn't help but also use his right arm to fend off the attack. He had to use all his efforts to block this attack, counterattacking never came into the equation. Nevertheless, he managed to block all the attacks and quickly leapt back in case of some more weird moves.

"Old Master Zhou!" cried Guo Xiang, "Two arms are not enough! You need three!" The old man laughed heartily and repeatedly nodded his head as a very high compliment to Yang Guo.

Yang Guo was impressed that Zhou was able to block all these profound sudden attacks and called out the next stance, "Watch this next stance: 'Dragging Mud with Water' [Tuo Ni Dai Shui]."

Both the old man and the young girl cheered, "Very nice! That sounds very nice!" he shouted.

"Don't you praise me just yet. Take this one!" Yang Guo countered. His right sleeve flowed like water and his left palm slid out heavily like flowing mud and sand.

Zhou recalled something that his apprentice brother Wong Zhongyang told him about Huang Yaoshi. Huang Yaoshi had a palm technique he invented called the 'Palms of the

Five Elements', the five elements were contained within the palms. Right now, Yang Guo's right sleeve was like North's water and his left palm was like Central's earth, light and swift along with heavy and fierce. Zhou did not dare delay and immediately used the 'Vacant Fist' with his left hand and the 'Demon Subduing Fist' with his right; light against light, heavy against heavy. After the two attacks came together, they both shouted and moved back a couple of steps.

After those four stances, they both had great respect for each other. Yang Guo stood and stared blankly for a moment. He understood that Zhou was the strongest opponent his palms had ever met and if there was going to be a victor; an internal energy competition would be needed. If they did that, there was a possibility that one or maybe both of them would be heavily injured or even die – something he was not prepared to do after what happened to Hong Qigong and Ouyang Feng. Why would he do something like that to such a benevolent man as Zhou Botong? He swallowed his pride and bowed to him saying, "Senior Zhou, I admit defeat." He then turned to Guo Xiang and said, "Little Sister, we failed to invite Senior Zhou. Let us leave!"

"Hold it! Hold it!" shouted the old man. "Didn't you say the 'An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang' has seventeen stances? You've just used four of them, what about the other thirteen?"

"There is no enmity between us," said Yang Guo. "Why should we fight to death? Junior admits defeat."

Zhou Botong shook his head, "Not right! Not right!" he said, "You have not lost yet, and I haven't won. Don't ever think of leaving this valley before you show me all the palms."

Yang Guo chuckled, "Senior, you act strange. I was trying to invite you to come with us, and now that I failed, I just want to leave. Why would you hold me here?"

Zhou Botong – who was crazy about martial arts, was baffled. "Good Brother," he begged, "How could I guess the thirteen stances of the 'An Ran Xiao Hun Zhang'? I hope you'll have pity on this old man. Please show me, I am willing to trade with any skill of your fancy."

An idea clicked on Yang Guo's head. "It's not difficult to learn my technique," he said, "I don't want anything in return; as long as you come with us to see Yinggu."

The old man wrinkled his eyebrows and said, "I won't see her even if you chop off my head."

“In that case, let me bid you farewell,” said Yang Guo, turning his body around.

Suddenly Zhou leaped to block Yang Guo’s path and threw out a fist. “Good Brother, please show me just one more stance,” he begged. Yang Guo defended using Quanzhen martial arts. Zhou changed his fist techniques but Yang Guo kept to using Quanzhen palm techniques and Nine Yin martial arts to defend.

The ‘Nine Yin Manual’ contained all kinds of martial arts techniques; therefore, it was more than enough for Yang Guo to defend himself. If Yang Guo wanted to defeat Zhou Botong, it would be no easy task; but now that he’s just concentrating on defending, Zhou was not able to do anything to him. No matter what kind of ruses or tricks that Zhou tried, Yang Guo did not fall for any of them. He did not use any new stances of his “Melancholic Sad Palms” but he repeated the four stances of his ‘Melancholic Sad Palms’ that he had previously used with different variations to agitate Zhou Botong even more.

The two fought for almost an hour. Zhou Botong was an old man, his vigor had been depleted and his internal energy was no longer the same as it was at the start of the fight. He knew now it would be difficult to get Yang Guo to use a new palm from his ‘An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang’ so he leapt back and begged Yang Guo, “All right! All right! I will kowtow eight times and take you as my master. Master Yang, disciple Zhou Botong kowtows to you!” And he really kowtowed to Yang Guo!

Yang Guo chuckled again, “How could I be your master? Nevertheless, it’s suitable for me to tell you the names of the rest of the stances.”

“Good! Aw ...! You are so nice,” said the old man, ecstatic.

“Big Brother, don’t tell him unless he is willing to come with us,” said Guo Xiang.

Yang Guo smiled, “It’s OK. He will only hear the names.”

“Right! What’s the problem if I only hear the names?” said the old man hastily.

Yang Guo went over to a big tree and sat underneath it. “Brother Zhou, hear this: the other stances are ‘Wandering The Valley Of Emptiness’ [Pai Huai Kong Gu], ‘Strong Desire Weak Strength’ [Li Bu Cong Xin] ‘Good For Nothing’ [Xing Shi Zou Rou] ‘Disturbing Oneself – Confused Fool’ [Yong Ren Zi Rao] ‘Walking Upside Down – Perverse Action’ [Dao Xing Ni Shi]...”

Listening to this Guo Xiang was howling with laughter while rolling around holding her stomach; but Zhou Botong listened attentively. Yang Guo paused and smiled seeing Guo Xiang's behavior, then continued, “‘Restless Thought’ [Fei Qin Wang Shi], ‘A Lone Form Is A Mere Shadow’ [Gu Xing Zhi Ying] ‘Drink To Swallow One’s Hatred – Cherishes Hatred Suppresses Sobs’ [Yin Hen Tun Sheng] ‘Six Disturbed Spirits/Ghosts’ [Liu Shen Bu An] ‘Entering A Dead End’ [Qiong Tu Mo Lu], ‘Face Without Feeling’ [Mian Wu Ren Se], ‘Longing For Emptiness’ [Xiang Ru Fei Fei], ‘Stupid As A Wooden Chicken [Dai Ru Mu Ji].”

The old man only scratched his head and grinned. After acting bewildered for a while he finally said, “Strange ...! Wonderful ...! Take “Face Without Feeling” for instance, how would you use that to defeat an enemy?”

“That stance contains not only one but numerous variations,” explained Yang Guo. “Somebody who uses the stance has to be able to change his countenance, from upset to happy. The opponent will be affected by that change. We look sad, he would be sad, we look happy, he would follow. This one stance can defeat the enemy by manipulating their emotions.”

“Is that stance based on the “Soul Altering Spell” from the ‘Nine Yin Manual’?” asked Zhou Botong.

“That’s right,” answered Yang Guo.

“What about ‘Walking Upside Down’?” asked the Old Urchin.

Yang Guo immediately turned upside down and threw a punch. “This is one of the thirty seven variations of the stance.”

Zhou Botong nodded his head. “I know,” he said, “This is from Ouyang Feng.”

“Right again,” Yang Guo leaped back up, “but in my stance there are ‘bends among the straights’, the ‘bends’ and ‘straights’ work together.”

“What does it mean?” asked the old man.

“That is a secret, I can’t tell you.”

The old man opened his mouth, but then closed it again without saying anything. He knew, begging wouldn’t do him any good. He scratched his head and looked so

disappointed.

Seeing him like that, Guo Xiang's heart melted. She approached him and softly said, "Senior Zhou, why don't you want to see Yinggu? I bet Big Brother would be willing to teach you his skill."

Zhou Botong sadly sighed. "About Yinggu, it was due to my own foolishness when I was young," he said. "It is an embarrassing story."

"Why would you be embarrassed?" asked the young miss. "If you have something in your heart, better to talk it out than keep it to yourself. Every time I've done something wrong, I always admit it to my parents. True, they would scold me, but then that would it. If I lied, even though I did not get any scolding, I felt depressed. This time I disobeyed them by coming here without their permission. My mother will scold me for sure, but I will tell her the truth."

This young girl's honest words touched the old man's heart. He glanced at Yang Guo and softly said, "Very well, I will tell you what I did. Only please do not laugh in my face!"

"Who would mock you?" said Guo Xiang. She held the old man's arm, leaned on him and continued, "You can always tell the story like it happened to other people, or you could pretend it was an ancient lore. Afterward, I will also tell you my mischief."

Zhou Botong looked at her innocent face, smiled and asked, "You have done mischief?"

"You think I can't be naughty?" Guo Xiang countered.

"Well then," Zhou Botong said, "Let me hear what you did first."

"I have done much mischief. Let's see ... a soldier was on guard duty one night on the city wall; and he fell asleep. Father had him arrested and was going to have him beheaded the next morning. I saw him and my heart melted. I quietly let him go around midnight, and told him to run away as fast as he can. Father was furious. He found out it was my doing and he beat me up. Another time I saw a poor peasant girl looking longingly at my mother's golden bracelet. I stole it and gave it to that poor girl. Afterward Mother looked for it everywhere but could not find it. I laughed secretly, but did not say anything. Finally I told her the truth. She was not mad at me, but my elder sister insisted that I get the bracelet back from the girl."

Zhou Botong sighed heavily, “What you did is incomparable to what I’ve done.” Then, with embarrassment in his voice, he told how in his youth he tagged along his martial brother Wang Chongyang visiting the Emperor Duan. He told them how Concubine Liu had learned martial arts from him; how he secretly made love to her; how the Concubine had always wanted to see him but he kept avoiding her, and how – because of anger the Emperor abdicated his throne and became a monk.

Guo Xiang and Yang Guo listened attentively. After the old man finished, timidly she asked, “Besides Concubine Liu, did the Emperor have any other wives or concubines?”

“Even though he was incomparable to the Song Emperor, he had three palaces, six courtyards and dozens of other women: his queen and other concubines,” he answered.

“There! You see?” said the girl, “Emperor Duan had many other women, but you, you didn’t have a single woman. Therefore, as a friend, he could give Concubine Liu to you.”

Yang Guo nodded his head and thought, “This girl does not adhere strictly to common etiquette and tradition. Truly she is a girl after my own heart.”

“At that time Emperor Duan said the same thing,” the old man said. “But I know that he loved Concubine Liu very much. Because of this scandal he became a monk. This proves how deeply I have offended him.”

Listening to this, Yang Guo intervened, “Reverend Yideng became a monk because he thought he sinned against you and not because you sinned against him. Don’t you know that?”

“What did he do?” Zhou Botong wondered.

“Well, there was a man who injured your son and he refused to help him,” Yang Guo answered.

For all these long years Zhou Botong had never known that Yinggu bore him a son. “My ... my son?” he stammered.

“I don’t know the details,” answered Yang Guo, “I heard this from Reverend Yideng.” He immediately narrated what he heard at the Black Dragon Marsh.

Zhou Botong was spellbound. He stood silently, recalling how Yinggu had suffered for many-many years. A feeling of love, compassion and guilt slowly crept into his heart.

Yang Guo noticed this old man's behavior; he said in his heart, "This Senior is a compassionate man. His character is almost the same as mine. For a man like this, how could I withhold the seventeen stances of 'An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang'?" Having had this thought he then said, "Senior Zhou, let me show you the entire 'An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang'. I beg you to give me some pointers." And then he demonstrated all the stances of 'An Ren Xiao Hun Zhang' except the 'Face Without Feeling', because he was wearing a mask. As a highly skilled martial artist – plus a profound knowledge of the "Nine Yin Manual", Zhou Botong was immediately able to understand the stances. The only two he had some difficulty with were "Dead Man Walking" and "Entering a Dead End". Yang Guo explained several times, but he still could not grasp the essence of the stances. "Senior Zhou," Yang Guo finally said, "I was separated from my wife fifteen years ago. Day and night I kept thinking about her. In agony I created these two stances. Senior is a care-free man; you have never known suffering in your life. No wonder you cannot grasp the essence of the stances."

"Ah! How did you get separated from your wife?" the old man was surprised. "She was beautiful and kind hearted. No wonder you cannot forget her."

Yang Guo did not want to mention Guo Fu, so he told him how his wife was gravely injured, and was taken by the 'Divine Nun of the South Sea' as her disciple, and how he had to wait for sixteen years before they could see each other again. He also mentioned how he prayed everyday for his wife's safety. Finally he said, "I just want to see her one more time. Afterward, I don't care if I will have to die. I will die a satisfied man."

Listening to Yang Guo, Guo Xiang was saddened and tears flowed down her cheeks. "Oh God, let them see each other again," she said with a trembling voice.

Since his separation from his wife, this was the first time somebody had prayed for him earnestly. He was so touched and vowed not to forget her kindness. He heaved a sigh and bowed to Zhou Botong. "Senior Zhou, I bid you farewell." He took Guo Xiang's hand and left.

After only a few steps Guo Xiang looked back and said, "Senior Zhou, did you see that? Big Brother is thinking about his wife all the time. Yinggu is the same. She is thinking about you. Do you have the heart not to see her?"

Zhou Botong was startled and his countenance paled.

“Little Sister, let it go,” Yang Guo whispered. “Everybody has their own thoughts; we have no right to tell him what to do.” Slowly they left the “Hundred Flower Valley”. Their hearts were heavy.

“Big Brother,” Guo Xiang asked, “Are you going to be sad if I ask you about your wife?”

“No,” he answered, “We are going to see each other in a few months.”

“How did you meet her?” asked Guo Xiang.

Yang Guo then told her his life story. How as an orphan he was bullied by the Quanzhen priests, how he ran away to the Ancient Tomb and met Xiao Longnu, and how after several years of living together they fell in love with each other, and finally how they got separated at the ‘Broken Heart Cliff’.

Guo Xiang was listening with a sad heart. After Yang Guo finished his story, she said earnestly, “I pray to Heaven that you will meet her safely.”

“Thank you, thank you very much!” Yang Guo said. “I will not forget your prayer. I will let my wife know about your loving kindness toward us.”

“Every year, right on my birthday, Mother will pray to Heaven for our safety,” Guo Xiang continued. “That day she always tells me to make three wishes. Oftentimes I could not figure out what to wish even after thinking about it for half a day. But this year, I already know what to wish. I will wish that Big Brother will meet your lovely wife much earlier.”

“And the other two wishes?” asked Yang Guo.

Guo Xiang laughed, “That’s a secret. I cannot tell you.”

A moment later they heard somebody calling behind them, “Brother Yang, wait! Brother Yang, wait for me!” It was Zhou Botong.

Yang Guo was overjoyed! Quickly he turned his head and saw the old man coming to them with blinding speed. “Brother Yang!” he shouted, “I carefully thought it out. Take me to see Yinggu.”

“Now, that is the proper thing to do,” Guo Xiang was so touched. “You don’t have any idea how great her suffering was.”

“After you left, I kept thinking about what Brother Yang said,” explained the old man. “I won’t be able to sleep for the rest of my life unless I see her. I have an important question I’d like to ask her.”

Zhou Botong wanted to continue the journey overnight if it were up to him. But Guo Xiang was too tired, so he reluctantly agreed to stop and rest underneath a big tree. Very early the next morning they started walking again. They arrived at the Black Dragon Marsh before noon.

Seeing that Yang Guo was successful in bringing Zhou Botong along, Yideng and Yinggu’s delight was indescribable. From afar Zhou Botong had already shouted his question, “Yinggu, how many cowlicks were there on our son’s head?”

Yinggu was surprised. Not in her wildest dream did she think that Zhou’s first question would be a seemingly meaningless one like that. But she answered anyway, “Two.”

“Aha! Same as me!” cried the old man. “That kid must be very smart.” He paused a moment and then regretfully said, “Too bad he died!”

Yinggu was happy and sad at the same time, she sobbed uncontrollably. The old man playfully punched her on the waist and said, “There, don’t cry, don’t cry ...” He turned his head toward Yideng and said, “Emperor Duan, I seduced your wife, and you did not help my child. It’s a draw. Nobody owes anybody anything. Let us forget the past.”

“This is the man who injured your son,” Yideng said, pointing toward Ci’en. “You can kill him.”

“Yinggu, go ahead!” said Zhou Botong.

The old granny looked at Ci’en intently and then softly said, “If not for him, I might not have seen you for the rest of my life. Besides, we cannot raise the dead. With the joy I experience today, I am willing to forgive and forget what had happened!”

“Right ... that’s right,” said Zhou Botong. “Very well, let us forgive him.”

In his half conscious state, Ci’en was still able to comprehend what was happening around him. He was so relieved. He turned his eyes toward Yideng and weakly said, “Thank you Shifu for perfecting me.” Then to Yang Guo he said, “Thank you benevolent master for toiling on my behalf.” Upon saying that he closed his eyes and gave up his ghost, smiling.

Reverend Yideng immediately said a prayer and bowed, “Ci’en ... Ci’en ...” he said hoarsely. “Officially we are master and disciple, but in reality you are my friend. For many, many years we have lived together and you always wanted to redeem your sins. Today you go to that eternal place. My heart is saddened, but I am happy.” Then with Yang Guo and Guo Xiang’s help he dug the earth and buried the monk.

Yang Guo stood in front of the grave, staring blankly. He recalled the time when they were a newly wed couple, how Xiao Longnu and he met Ci’en at the hut on the snow covered mountain, and how Ci’en was lashing out in his sickness. But now, one of the experts in the Jianghu world was laid beneath the earth. He could not help but feel very sad.

A moment later Yinggu took the two foxes from her robe. “Master Yang,” she said, “I don’t have anything to repay your kindness. Please take these two animals.”

Yang Guo took one and said, “Thank you. I think one is enough.”

Suddenly Yideng said, “Master Yang, you take both of them, but don’t kill them. Just slit their knees. From each fox, alternately, take one small cup of blood everyday. After taking two cups, no matter how bad your friend’s injury is, he will certainly recover.”

Yinggu and Yang Guo were thrilled. “It will be great that we don’t have to take their lives,” Yang Guo said. And then he took both animals and bade Reverend Yideng, Zhou Botong and Yinggu goodbye.

“After you are done, just let them go,” said the granny, “They’ll know the way home.”

Suddenly Zhou Botong said, “Emperor Duan, Yinggu, I invite you to take a rest for a few days in the Hundred-Flower Valley. Brother Yang, after your friend is cured you and little sister have to stop by and we’ll have a good time together.”

“If everything goes as planned, I will certainly come and visit you three seniors,” he answered, paid his respects and left.

The foxes’ eyes were looking at Yinggu, they whimpered softly as though begging for mercy. Yinggu shouted, “Master Yang won’t take your lives, what are you afraid of?” Guo Xiang stretched out her hand, put on a comforting smile, and stroked the foxes’ heads.



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