

Chapter

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A NOVEL BY JIN YONG

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Incident in the Blizzard

# Legend of the Condor Heroes

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The Taoist let out a hearty laugh; suddenly his right palm rose and with the speed of a lightning strike hit the handle of the spear. "Crack!" Yang TieXin felt the part between the base of his thumb and index finger go numb and hastily released the spear, letting it drop onto the snow covered ground.

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## Incident in the Blizzard

Day in and day out, day after day, the QianTang River majestically winds through and around Ox Family Village, near the city of Lin'An, on its journey toward the sea. On the shores there stood thirty or so tallow trees, leaves red like fire, yet another sign that it was now August. The wild weeds and grass around the village had just started to turn yellow. The sun shone down at a low angle on the grass, adding even more to their bleakness. Underneath two giant pine trees there gathered a group of villagers; the crowd included both men and women along with more than ten children. All of them were listening to a thin old man, giving him their complete attention.

The old man was about fifty or so, the green robe that he was wearing had been washed to a bluish-gray. He banged two pieces of wood together a couple of times, with the little bamboo stick in his left hand he started to beat on a little drum to keep pace. He started to sing:

“The peach blossoms without fail, vast unused fields feeding the crows. After the soldiers by the well, families gather in sorrow.”

The old man banged the drum with the stick a couple of times more, and then continued: “Old Man Yie had a wife, a son, and a daughter. They lost each other when the Jin invaded. Finally, after many hardships and much difficulty, they were able to get back together. They returned to their home to find that the Jin soldiers had burned it to the ground. They had no choice but to head off to BianLiang. <sup>i</sup> ‘The heavens produce unexpected storms, people have unforeseen misfortunes’. As soon as the four of them got to BianLiang, they ran into a troop of Jin soldiers. The leader of the soldiers looked down and saw that Young Miss Yie was quite beautiful; he jumped down from his horse, and grabbed her. With a laugh, he threw her onto his saddle and said: ‘Pretty little girl, you are going to go home with me.’ How could Young Miss Yie agree? She struggled with all her might. The leader yelled out: ‘If you don’t stop struggling, then your family will die!’ He picked up his ‘wolf fang’ club and smashed it down on her brother’s head...The nether world gains a new ghost, the real world loses one more soul.”

“Old Man Yie and his wife fell onto their son’s body and started to cry their hearts out. That Jin soldier lifted up this ‘wolf fang’ club twice more and took care of them. Young Miss Yie did not cry, she simply said: ‘Sir, please stop killing people. I’ll go with you.’ This made the soldier extremely happy. Just as he let his guard down, Young Miss Yie suddenly grabbed the saber at his waist, pulled it out, and thrust at his heart. It looked like she was about to avenge her family’s death; but alas it was not to be. That soldier had much experience on the battlefield; without thinking, he merely pushed her forward very naturally, sending Young Miss Yie to the ground. He had just enough time to say: ‘Little bitch!’ But Young Miss Yie has already brought the blade to her neck. Poor girl: ‘With a flower’s beauty and the moon’s grace, such a sweet soul dying sadly so young.’”

He alternated between talking and singing. Every single one of the villagers was now sighing in sadness and rage. The man continued: “Dear audience members, as the saying goes: ‘Treat others with an honest heart, hold your head up on high with pride. If evil deeds go unpunished, only the evil will survive.’ The Jin has conquered half of our Great Song, killing, burning, raping and pillaging; not an evil deed left undone. Yet no punishment whatsoever seems to be forthcoming. Our Great Song’s officials are responsible for this. Central Plain has plenty of healthy and available soldiers; yet every time we go up against the Jin armies, all they do is turn around and run, leaving us peasants behind to suffer. There are stories, like the one about Young Miss Yie and her family, by the thousands north of the river. Living here south of the river is truly like being in heaven on earth, but we fear the day the Jin soldiers come invading. ‘Rather be a dog in peace, than a man in troubled times!’ My name is Zhang ShiWu, thanks everyone for listening to the story of ‘Miss Yie, the Young Martyr.’” After banging the drum several more times, he held up a tray.

Many of the villagers placed a coin or two in the pan, which quickly filled up. Zhang ShiWu thanked the villagers and gathered the sixty or seventy coins into his travel bag. He got up and started to walk off.

A young man of around twenty years of age walked out from among the villagers. He asked: “Mr. Zhang, did you just come from the north?” The young fellow was very tall and very well built with big eyes and a pair of very bushy eyebrows.

Zhang ShiWu answered: “Yes.”

The young man answered: “Then let’s have a couple of drinks. I’ll pay, what do you say?”

Zhang ShiWu replied: "I dare not receive such a favor as a stranger." The young fellow laughed and answered: "Once we've had a couple of drinks, then we are no longer strangers are we? My surname is Guo, given name XiaoTian"

Pointing at a clean, white-faced fellow behind him, he continued: "This here is Yang TieXin. The two of us were just listening to your story. As expected, it was a good story; but we still have several questions we wanted to ask."

Zhang ShiWu replied: "No problem, no problem. To run into the two of you today is probably fate doing its work." Guo XiaoTian led Zhang ShiWu to one of the small wine shops in Ox Family Village and sat down at one of the tables.

The owner of this little wine shop is a cripple. Supported by two crutches, he slowly brought out two jugs of wine, a plate of peas, a plate of salted peanuts, a plate of dried bean curd, and a plate with three salted eggs. Afterwards he sat down on the stool by the door and stared at the setting sun, not even glancing at the three men.

Guo XiaoTian poured the wine and made Zhang ShiWu down two bowls before he began: "Here in the country, we only get to buy meat on the 2nd and the 16th, so we don't have any meat to go down with the wine. Please forgive us." Zhang ShiWu replied: "At least we've got wine, can't complain about that. From your accents, seems like you two are from up north."

Yang TieXin answered: "We are both from ShanDong province. We moved away three years ago because we couldn't stand the Jin running loose around there. When we arrived, we fell in love with the people here and settled down. Just now you were saying that us living here south of the river is like living in heaven itself, fearing only an invasion by the Jin. Do you really think that the Jin will invade?"

Zhang ShiWu sighed: "Gold and silver could literally cover the ground and there are beautiful women every which way you look; such is the richness and enchantment of the south. There isn't a day that passes without the Jin thinking about invading. But the final decision about the invasion of the Jin is not made by the Jin, but is made by the Imperial Court of our Great Song in Lin'An!" This took both Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin by surprise. They asked as one: "Why do you say that?"

Zhang ShiWu continued: "We Han people outnumber the NuZhen by more than one hundred to one. If only the Imperial Court started using honest and loyal men. With one hundred of us going up against one of them, how could the Jin army win? The northern half of our country was literally handed over to the Jin in the past by Hui Zong, Qin Zong, and Gao Zong. Those three emperors, from grandfather to grandson, trusted and used corrupt officials, oppressed the

masses, and then they either killed or somehow got rid of all the generals that were fighting the Jin. Such a beautiful land, and they literally put it right into the hands of the Jin. Of course the Jin people respectfully accepted it. If the Imperial Court continues to do what it did then, trusting and using corrupt officials, then it is as if they are kneeling on the ground asking the Jin army to come. How could the Jin refuse?" After hearing that, Guo XiaoTian couldn't help but to slam his hand down onto the table in rage. All of the bowls, plates, and chopsticks on the tables jumped from the impact.

Zhang ShiWu continued: "Thinking back, Hui Zong was all set on trying to live forever and become immortal. He was surrounded by corrupt and useless officials: Zai Jing and Wong Yu only knew how to raise taxes and skim off the top. Tong Guan and Liang ShiChen were eunuchs that only knew how to suck up. Gao Qiu and Li BangYan only knew how to lie around and get girls for the emperor. The emperor did not attend to official matters at all; if he wasn't going off to visit monks to ask for guidance, then he was traveling around in search of rare and interesting looking rocks. Once the Jin came, he became a turtle, hiding in his shell and passing the throne to his son, Qin Zong. At that time Li Gang was defending the capital BianLiang and fought off the Jin army. But who would think that Qin Zong would believe some rumors that were started by corrupt officials and dismiss Li Gang. On top of that, he did not replace Li Gang with another experienced and able general. Instead he put the defense of the capital in the hands of a self-proclaimed "Ambassador from the Gods" named Gao Zong and asked him to invite the Army of Heaven to defend the city. The Army of Heaven did not show up. How could we not lose the capital? At last both Hui Zong and Qin Zong were captured by the Jin army. These two fools had it coming and got what they deserved. But they also brought disaster to millions of Han peasants who did nothing to deserve it."

Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin were just getting madder and madder. Guo XiaoTian said: "We have all heard about the capture of the emperors, and the disgrace of the year of Jing Kang, many times. We have also heard about the 'Army of Heaven' talk before, but we just thought it was a joke or some unfounded rumor. Could this possibly be true?"

Zhang ShiWu answered: "Absolutely true."

Yang TieXin added: "Afterwards Lord Kang declared himself emperor in NanJing. He had under him such able and loyal generals as Yue Fei and Han ShiZhong. If he had immediately attacked north, although he might not have reclaimed all the lost lands, he would have had no problem recapturing the capital BianLiang. But that hated traitor Qing Hui only wanted to negotiate; he did an about face and killed our beloved General Yue." <sup>ii</sup>

Zhang ShiWu poured a bowl of wine for all three of them and downed his bowl in one gulp. He went on: “Beloved General Yue once said these two lines: ‘Only aspire to eat Tatar flesh, and chat away while drinking Hun’s blood.’ This poem conveyed what is in the heart of every Han. Ay! This traitor Qing Hui is awfully lucky. It’s a shame that we were born sixty years too late.”

Guo XiaoTian asked: “What do you mean?”

Zhang ShiWu replied: “Then you two heroes would go into Lin’An and kill this traitor. Then the three of us would eat his flesh and drink his blood and there would be no more need for us to come here to eat peas and drink cold wine anymore!” All three of them laughed heartily at that comment.

Yang TieXin noticed that the jug of wine had been emptied and ordered another one. The three of them just sat there cursing Qing Hui. The cripple placed another dish of peas as well as a dish of peanuts on the table. Hearing the three men’s spirited cursing of Qing Hui, he suddenly let out a rather loud snort.

Yang TieXin turned to him and asked: “Qu San, what’s the matter? You don’t think we are wrong to curse at Qing Hui do you?”

Qu San, the cripple, answered: “Good cursing! Great cursing! There’s nothing wrong with that. It is just that I have heard that Qing Hui wasn’t the chief culprit in killing Yue Fei in order to negotiate peace.”

The three men asked in surprise: “Qing Hui wasn’t the main culprit? Then who was?”

Qu San replied: “Qing Hui was the Chancellor; whether or not peace was negotiated he still was and would keep on being Chancellor. But our beloved General Yue only wanted to destroy the Jin and bring back the two emperors Hui and Qin. Once those two emperors return, how do you suppose Emperor Gao Zong was going to keep his crown?” As soon as he finished saying what he said, he turned around and struggled back to the stool, and returned to staring at the sky as if in a trance. Qu San’s face looked no older than thirty something years old, yet he was hunched over, with traces of white in his hair. From the back, he looked like an old man.

Zhang ShiWu and the two men looked at each other in silence. After a while, Zhang ShiWu spoke up: “That is so true! Sir, you have really hit on something! The real culprit behind the killing of our beloved General Yue could very well not be Qing Hui, but Emperor Gao Zong. This Emperor Gao Zong was shameless to begin with, he definitely could do something like that!”

Guo XiaoTian asked: “Is he really that shameless?”

Zhang ShiWu replied: “Back when the beloved General Yue had just beaten the Jin army in several battles in a row, along with the rebellion of our patriotic brothers in the north, we had the Jin army against the wall. The Tatars were just beginning to panic wondering what to do, when suddenly Gao Zong sent them a letter of surrender and asked for peace negotiations. Naturally the Jin Emperor was ecstatic, but he replied: ‘There will be no peace negotiations unless Yue Fei is killed.’ So Qing Hui went about his evil plan and our beloved General Yue was killed in the Pavilion of Changes. The beloved General Yue was killed November of the 11th year of Zhao Xing. One month later, peace was agreed upon. The boundary between Song and Jin was drawn at the River Huai and Emperor Gao Zong called himself a subject of the Jin Emperor. How do you think the letter of surrender was written?”

Yang TieXin answered: “Shamelessly, of course.”

Zhang ShiWu replied: “Of course! I happen to know what was written in the letter. It read: ‘Your humble subject asks for forgiveness and mercy. If received, your subject will be forever grateful; our humble sons and descendants will forever be of service to your majesty. Your humble subject also swears to give yearly tribute in the amount of two hundred fifty thousand taels of silver and two hundred fifty thousand bolts of silk. Not only did he sell himself as a servant, but all of his descendants as well. Him becoming a servant is really no big deal, but is that not like saying that every Han is their servant as well?’”

“Bang!” Guo XiaoTian slammed down hard onto the table again, this time tipping one of the bowls over, spilling wine all over the table. In anger, he shouted: “Shameless! Disgraceful! How did this sorry excuse of a man ever become an emperor?”

Zhang ShiWu continued: “When our nation heard about this treaty, there was not a person on the street who was not enraged. Those Han people north of the River Huai were especially grief stricken because they saw that our country is no longer whole. Gao Zong, knowing that his seat on the throne is secured, immediately rewarded Qing Hui for his ‘meritorious service’. Qing Hui was already Lord of Lu, and now Gao Zong added the title of Grand Marshall to his name, giving him almost supreme power under the emperor. Xiao Zong succeeded Gao Zong, and Guang Zong succeeded him; all the while the Jin are still controlling half of Central Plains. Now Emperor Qin Yuan has succeeded Guang Zong. He has been on the throne for five years now, mostly going along with what the Chancellor Han TuoZhou says. What is the future going to be like? He...he, it’s hard to say, hard to say!” During the last few words, he did not stop shaking his head.

Guo XiaoTian replied: “What’s so hard to say about it? This is the countryside and not like Lin’An where you might get your head cut off! There isn’t a person in the world that doesn’t call Han TuoZhou a crook! If you compare his betraying the country and oppressing the people, the man is practically a sworn brother of Qing Hui!”

Now that they were talking about current affairs, Zhang ShiWu was starting to feel a little tinge of fear and dared not criticize and talk straight from his heart as he did before. He downed another bowl and said: “Thanks to both of you gentlemen for the wine. May I offer a modest word of advice? I know both of you gentlemen are passionate men, but it is still most wise to be cautious in words and deeds so as to avoid any possible calamities. At this point, the most that us normal folk can hope for is to muddle along and do the best that we can. Ay! Just like the saying:

*“Surrounded by the mountains in the halls,  
when will the West Lake parties finally go?  
Southern fragrances intoxicate all,  
happily mistaking HangZhou for BianLiang!”*

Yang TieXin asked: “What’s the story behind those four lines?” Zhang ShiWu answered: “There is no story. It is just a saying indicating that the officials of our Great Song Dynasty only care about partying and drinking on the shores of the West Lake. They want to pretend that HangZhou is our capital and never bother thinking about taking back our land and moving back to BianLiang again.”

By the time Zhang ShiWu said goodbye he was dead drunk. As he stumbled toward BianLiang, one could hear him muttering to himself the words of “River Soaked in Red” by Yue Fei: “Jing Kang’s Disgrace, still fresh in mind; people’s hatred, when will it stop? I drive my cart...”

Guo XiaoTian paid the tab and walked home with Yang TieXin. The two of them lived right next to each other; after walking a short distance, they made it back to their homes.

Guo XiaoTian’s wife Li was just chasing a chicken into a little trap. Turning around, she smiled and said: “You two went drinking again? Brother Yang, why don’t you and your wife come over for dinner tonight? We are going to cook a whole chicken.”

Yang TieXin smiled back and answered: “Alright, I guess we are going to inconvenience you two once again. We have so many chickens and ducks to waste food on, but we can’t part with any of them.” Li replied: “Well your wife is just that kind hearted. She says that she raised those chickens and ducks since

they were babies; how could she possibly kill them?" Yang TieXin laughed and replied: "I told her that I would kill them if she can't make herself do it, and then she started crying. Ay! What can I do? Tell you what, tonight I'm going to go hunting and we'll invite the two of you over tomorrow night!" Guo XiaoTian cut in: "We are family! Quit talking about who's inviting who and who is not! Tonight we go hunting together!"

At midnight, Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin went into the woods 3.5 li west of the village, hoping to catch a boar or something of that nature. But after waiting for more than two hours, they heard nothing. Just as they were about to lose patience, they suddenly heard faint sounds of metal banging together coming from outside of the woods. They looked at each other, both wondering: "What's going on now?"

At that moment, from afar, there came the sounds of several men shouting: "Where do you think you are going?"

"Stop this instant!" Then a shadow jumped into the woods.

Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin finally were able to see the person now that he is in the moonlight. The two of them were shocked. For this man was the crippled owner of that wine shop in the village, Qu San. He thrust his left crutch onto the ground, producing a "Zeng sound". His body flew off the ground and behind a tree. This was a display of an incredible level of Qing Gong. Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin looked at each other again in astonishment, both of them thinking: "We had no clue that Qu San's kung fu is this good, and we have been living here for three whole years!" Both of them stayed hidden in the bushes, not daring to move or come out.

Footsteps keep on getting closer until three men had made it to the edge of the woods. They whispered something to each other and started to walk slowly into the woods. All three of them were dressed in military clothing and each of them had a saber in hand. In the moonlight, the sabers gave off a faint green glow. One of them shouted: "Damned cripple! Your old man here can see you, better quickly surrender and come out!" Qu San kept still behind the tree. The three men started waving their swords wildly, swinging and taking a cut at anything in their way. Very slowly, the three of them got closer and closer. Suddenly there came a faint thump. Qu San had thrust his right crutch out from behind the tree, hitting one of the men squarely on his chest. That man gave out a muffled groan before flying backwards and falling on the ground. The other two men immediately began to hack at Qu San.

Qu San gave his right crutch a push and jumped several feet to the left, avoiding the sabers. His left crutch immediately went straight for one of the men's face. The man's kung fu was not that bad either; he tried to parry the

crutch with his saber. Qu San did not wait for the two to meet before withdrawing his crutch to support himself again. His right crutch came swinging in at the other man's waist. He used his crutches with great speed and quickness. Even though he always had to use one of them to support himself, leaving only one to fight with at all times, he was not losing to the men. Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin noticed that he was carrying a huge bundle on his back, seemingly very cumbersome. After some more fighting, one of the sabers came down and hit the bundle. "Dang!" The bundle ripped and the objects inside spilled onto the ground. Qu San took advantage of his temporary distraction and smashed down hard on the head of the man with his crutch. The man fell onto the ground without so much as a whimper. The only man left was by now scared to death; he turned around and started to run. Qu San took out something from his bosom and raised his arm very quickly. A ball-like object flew through the air in the moonlight, followed by a muted thump as the object hit the back of the man's head. The man let out a ghastly scream and dropped his saber as his arm started to swing wildly out of control. Slowly, he fell back and crumpled to the ground. After a couple of twitches, he stopped moving.

Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin had just witnessed Qu San kill three men in succession while displaying a level of kung fu that neither one of them had ever seen before. Both of their hearts were racing, afraid to even breath too loudly, for both of them were thinking the same thing: "He'd just killed government officials; that is a huge crime. We don't stand a chance if he finds us here and wants to kill us to keep this quiet."

Qu San turned around and slowly spoke: "Brother Guo, Brother Yang, you can come out now!"

Once the two of them got over their shock, they had no choice but to step out of the bushes, although both of them were holding their pitchforks rather tightly. Yang TieXin snuck a look over at Guo XiaoTian and the pitchfork in his hand and took two extra steps. Qu San smiled: "Brother Yang, your Yang Family Spear Technique (Yang Jia Qiang Fa) can be used with a pitchfork, but your sworn brother uses a pair of short halberds and the pitchfork does not fit his skills, so you step up in front of him. Such righteousness...such friendship!" Yang TieXin, hearing Qu San spell out exactly what he was thinking, suddenly felt very exposed and couldn't decide what to do. Qu San continued: "Brother Guo, let's say you had your double halberd in hand. Do you think the two of you together can beat me?"

Guo XiaoTian shook his head: "No, we can't. The two of us must have been blind, living here together with you for all these years and not even noticing that you knew kung fu, let alone were a master."

Qu San shook his head and sighed: “I can’t even use my legs, how can I be considered a master?” As if his spirits were waning, he continued: “Before I lost their use, would I have had so much trouble with several armed guards? Ay! I’m useless now! Useless!” Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin glanced at each other, not sure how, or should they, dare to respond.

Qu San continued: “Would you two help out this cripple and bury these three bodies?” The two of them glanced at each other again, Yang TieXin answered: “Alright!”

The two of them dug a big hole using their pitchforks and tossed the three bodies in. While they were moving the last body, Yang TieXin notices that part of the black object was still sticking out of the back of the man’s head. He gave it a good tug with his right arm and pulled it out. Turned out it was an Eight Diagram throwing weapon made out of iron, he wiped the blood off on the body and handed it back to Qu San. <sup>iii</sup>

Qu San took the Eight Diagram weapon and said: “So sorry for troubling you.” He puts the Eight Diagram weapon back into his pocket. He then laid the piece of cloth that used to be his bundle onto the ground and started to put the objects that were scattered on the ground back into it. Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin finished putting dirt back into the hole, turned around and saw three rolled up paintings on the ground as well as many other bright and shiny metal objects. Qu San left out a golden jug and a golden bowl. After putting everything else back in the bundle, he held those two things up to Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin, saying: “These things were stolen by me from the Royal Palace in Lin’An. The emperor has done enough harm to the peasants; taking a little bit of what he stole from them isn’t really a crime. Consider these two things a present from me.”

The two of them couldn’t believe that he was actually brazen enough to break into the Royal Palace and steal. Neither one of them dared to accept his gifts.

Qu San said in a stern voice: “Are you guys afraid to accept, or do you two not want to?”

Guo XiaoTian replied: “The two of us did nothing to deserve such gifts and that’s why we can’t accept them. As for what happened tonight, you don’t have to worry about a thing brother, neither one of us is going to let this secret get out.”

Qu San replied: “Hmph! Why should I be worried about you two leaking this secret? I know all about you two and your backgrounds; why else would I let you two leave here alive? Brother Guo, you are the descendant of Guo Sheng, one of the heroes of the Water Margins of Mount Liang. You use the halberd

skill that is taught in your family, only the halberd is short instead of long, and has two blades instead of one. Brother Yang, your ancestor is Yang ZaiXin, one of the generals who served under the beloved General Yue. You two are descendants of two patriotic heroes. When the Jin army conquered the North; you two began wondering the martial world and became martial brothers. And then the two of you moved to Ox Family Village together. Am I right so far?"<sup>iv</sup>

The two of them, now knowing that Qu San knew their pasts inside out, were even more shocked. All they could do was nod.

Qu San continued: "Guo Sheng and Yang ZaiXin were both rebels before going over to the government's side to fight for the Great Song Empire. Both of them have stolen from the thieving government. So tell me, are you two going to accept my gifts or not?" Yang TieXin thought to himself: "If I refuse, then it will surely offend him." So he took the gifts from Qu San's hands and said: "We are very grateful for this. Thanks."

Qu San was pleased by this; he picked up the bundle and put it back onto his back. Turning around he said: "Time to go home." The three of them walked side-by-side out of the woods. Qu San said: "I got a couple of prize pieces tonight; two paintings by this Emperor Dao Jun and a sheet of his writing showing off his calligraphy as well. This fellow is no emperor, but his Red Green Plume and Thin Gold Form are indeed supreme in the world."

The other two men had no idea what in the world "Red Green Plume" or "Thin Gold Form" is, so all they did was nod in agreement. <sup>v</sup> After walking for a while, Yang TieXin spoke up: "Earlier today you said that half of our Great Song's land was lost to the hands of Emperor Dao Jun. So what is so good about his paintings or writings? Why would you brother to go to such trouble and take such a big risk as to go into the Royal Palace to steal it?"

Qu San smiled: "This is something that I guess you just won't understand." Guo XiaoTian spoke up as well: "If the Emperor Dao Jun can be so good at painting and writing, he must be pretty smart. It's pity that he does not concentrate on being a good ruler. When I was little my dad told me that a person, no matter what he does, must concentrate on doing one thing. If he tries to learn a little bit here, do something there, in the end he will get nothing accomplished."

Qu San answered: "For a normal person, this is true. But in this world there is someone who is a genius at everything. From language to martial arts; including writing, painting, music, and game of Go <sup>vi</sup>; from math to military tactics; even medicine, astrology, and the five elements; there is not a thing that he does not understand, not a thing he has not mastered. It's just that you guys

won't ever meet him." He looked up at the waning moon, and let out a long sigh.

Under the moonlight, Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin suddenly noticed tears on Qu San's face. When the two of them got home, they buried the two golden objects deep within their backyard, not even telling their wives about it. After that night the two of them acted as if nothing had happened; they lived off their farms and whatever they caught and when there was spare time they practiced their kung fu. Even when they were by themselves, neither ever brought up what had happened that night. The two of them still visited the little wine shop occasionally for a couple jugs of wine. Qu San still served the wine along with some peas, peanuts, and other snacks that helped the wine go down. Afterwards he always went and sat down by the door and went off into his own little world, lost in his thoughts. It was as if that night had never happened. The only difference was that when Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin look at Qu San, their eyes were filled with respect.

Autumn slowly gave way to incipient winter; the days just keep getting colder and colder. One night, with the cold north wind blowing, it started to snow. The day after that it continued to snow even more. The whole sky was filled with snowflakes and the ground looked like it was covered with precious jade, white as far as the eye could see. Yang TieXin told his wife that tonight he is going to get some wine and food so that they can invite his sworn brother and his wife over so all of them can have a nice dinner and enjoy the snow. After lunch, he grabbed two big gourds and went off to the wine shop to get some wine. When he got there, he noticed that the door was shut tight; even the wine shop sign was taken down.

Yang TieXin knocked on the door a couple of times and shouted: "Brother Qu San, I'm here to buy three liters of wine." No response came. After waiting a bit, he called out again and still no response came. He walked over to a window and looked inside, everything in the room is covered in a layer of dust. He thought to himself: "I haven't come here for several days; turns out that Qu San hasn't been here for several days as well. I hope nothing's happened." So he had to brave the blizzard and walk to the wine shop 5 li away in Red Plum Village to get the wine as well as a chicken. When he got back he killed the chicken and gave it to his wife to take care of the rest.

His wife's surname is Bao, and her given name was XiRuo. She's the daughter of a teacher at the private school in Red Plum Village. They have been married for a little under two years now. She put the chicken along with some cabbage, bean curd, and thin noodles made from bean starch (fen si) into a big pot. While the pot is boiling on top of a fire, she cut a plate of cured meat and cured fish. At dusk, she went over to the Guos' and invited them over for some wine, food and to enjoy the snow.

Guo XiaoTian happily came over. His wife Li was not feeling very well for the last couple of days because of her pregnancy. She had been throwing up anything she eats, so she decided not to come over. Li's given name is Ping. She and Bao XiRuo are like sisters and the two of them chatted for a long time. Only after making her a pot of tea did she finally return home. When she got back she saw that the two men had already moved the charcoal stove onto the table to keep the wine warm. The two of them had already started.

Guo XiaoTian said: "Sister, we weren't patient enough to wait for you. Please come and join us." The two men has always gotten along and both are men of character, add that to the fact that in the country nobody really cares about the rules regarding men and women gathering together. Bao XiRuo smiled and nodded, putting some more charcoal onto the stove; she picked up another bowl for the wine and sat down beside her husband. She noticed that there are hints of anger on both men's faces; she smiled and asked: "Something wrong again? What's gotten the two of you so angry?" Yang TieXin answered: "We were just talking about the stuff that goes on in the Imperial Court in Lin'An."

Guo XiaoTian added: "I was at the Joyful Rain Pavilion, the tea house at the head of the Tranquility Bridge, yesterday when I heard some people talking about that bastard, Chancellor Han TuoZhou. It didn't sound like they were making the stuff up either. One man said that no matter which official is filing a report, if the report does not have the words: 'Also present this -whatever - to the Chancellor', this bastard Chancellor does not even give the report another glance!"

Yang TieXin sighed: "When you have this kind of emperor, you'll get this kind of chancellor. When you have this kind of chancellor, then you'll get these kinds of officials. Big Brother Huang, who lives outside of Gushing Gold Gate of Lin'An, told me this story. One day he was cutting trees for firewood at the side of the mountain, when he suddenly saw a bunch of soldiers protecting a crowd of officials coming his way. It turned out that Chancellor Han TuoZhou was taking a sightseeing trip with all his underlings. He kept on minding his own business and went on cutting his trees. Suddenly he heard Han TuoZhou sighing and says: 'The bamboo fences and thatched cottage here really do make an extraordinary country scene. Pity it's missing the sounds of chickens crowing and dogs barking.' Soon after he said this, there suddenly came barking from the bushes."

Bao XiRuo laughed a little: "That little dog really knew how to please."

Yang TieXin answered: "It sure did, after barking for a bit, it jumped out of the bushes. What kind of dog do you suppose it was? Turns out it was our dignified and honorable Magistrate from the city of Lin'An, His Excellency Zhao!"

Bao XiRuo doubled over with laughter. Guo XiaoTian observed: “This little dog act by His Excellency Zhao has probably insured that he will be promoted very quickly.”

Yang TieXin answered: “Of course, it’s only natural.”

The three of them drank for a while. The snow outside was coming down even harder, but with some wine in their bellies, all three of them felt very warm and cozy. Suddenly, from the east, there came the sound of footsteps on the snowy road. The footsteps were very rapid. The three of them looked out and saw a Taoist priest.

The Taoist priest is wearing a bamboo hat and a cape, but snow covered his body. There was a sword on his back and the yellow tassel hanging off the handle of the sword swung back and forth in the wind. Snow filled the sky, and a lonely figure was walking in the snow; such a grand and gallant scene. Guo XiaoTian spoke up: “This Taoist knows quite a bit of kung fu, he looks like a real man of honor.” Yang TieXin replied: “That’s right. Let’s invite him in for a couple of drinks and make friends with him.” Both men loved to make new friends, so they both stood up and stepped outside. They noticed that the Taoist was already past them by more than two zhangs <sup>vii</sup> even though he is only walking. Such levels of Qing Gong <sup>viii</sup> are rarely heard of in the world.

The two of them looked at each other in astonishment. Yang TieXin yelled out: “Master Taoist, please stop!” The Taoist turned around and nodded at Yang TieXin. Yang TieXin continued: “With such weather outside, Master Taoist, why don’t you come inside and drink a couple of bowls to warm up.”

The Taoist sneered and in an instant arrived in front of them. Face full of disdain, he asked coldly: “You want me to stop, what for? Be frank and tell me!”

Yang TieXin thought the Taoist’s rudeness was completely uncalled for, so he just lowered his head and didn’t bother to answer. Guo XiaoTian cupped his fist and replied: “The two of us were just sitting by the fire keeping warm and drinking wine when we saw Master Taoist walking alone in the snow. So we boldly asked Master Taoist to join us, please forgive us for our offenses.” The Taoist rolled his eyes and said rather loudly: “Alright, alright! If you want to drink, then let’s drink!” And he walked through the door.

This made Yang TieXin even madder, he grabbed the Taoist’s left wrist, and with a pull he shouted: “You still haven’t told us how to address Master Taoist.” Suddenly he felt as if he was grabbing onto a slippery fish rather than a hand as the Taoist’s hand escaped his grasp. He knew he was in trouble and tried to back away; but before he could, a pain shot through his wrist as the

Taoist grabbed it. It was as if he was cuffed, and feeling both enormous pressure and heat, he hurriedly tried to struggle out of the Taoist's grasp. His entire right arm felt lifeless and weak, and his wrist was in great pain.

Guo XianTian saw his adopted brother's face turning totally red, he knew that the latter was suffering under the grip of the Taoist. He had initially approached the Taoist in good faith to make an acquaintance, so he felt that a fight at that point in time would only serve to offend a good man of the martial world. Thus he hurried over and said, "Master Taoist, please sit over here!" The Taoist laughed coldly and released his grip on Yang TieXin's wrist, before walking into the hall and sitting down in a rather arrogant manner. "You are both clearly men from ShanDong," he said, "yet you are hiding here in Lin'An and pretending to be a couple of farmers. It is a pity, though, that your ShanDong accent could not be changed. Furthermore, how could farming men be skilled in martial arts?"

Feeling both ill-at-ease and upset by the remark, Yang TieXin went into the inner hall and took a small dagger from a drawer. After putting the small dagger into his shirt, he returned to the outer hall. He poured out three bowls of wine and toasted one for himself, all the while not saying a word.

The Taoist just stared at the snow outside of the house with a proud look on his face, not drinking any wine nor saying anything. Guo XiaoTian saw that the Taoist had animosity written all over his face, and realized that the latter was certain that the wine had been adulterated. Hence, he took the cup before the Taoist and gulped its contents down. "The wine has become cold," he said. "Master Taoist, let me pour you a hot cup in return." When he was done, the Taoist picked the cup up and drank the wine in a single gulp.

Afterwards the Taoist said: "Even if there were knockout drugs in the wine, it wouldn't affect me." Yang TieXin finally had about all he could take: "We nicely invited you to come and have a drink with us, why would we try to harm you? If you plan to keep talking to us in such a manner, then please leave now! It's not like we had sour wine and rotten food that we can't get rid off!"

The Taoist ignored him and grabbed the wine gourd. Pouring and drinking, he downed three bowls in a row. Then he suddenly took off his bamboo hat and cape and threw them on the floor. Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin looked him over carefully. The Taoist is about thirty or so, squared faced with slanted eyebrows and a hint of redness. His eyes were bright and piercing. Next he untied the leather bundle on his back and threw it on the table.

Immediately, Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin jumped up. Because from the leather bundle rolled out a bloody human head!

Bao XiRuo screamed in fear and ran into the inner hall. Yang TieXin reached into his shirt and touched the dagger inside. The Taoist gave the leather bundle a shake and two more bloody objects fell out: a heart and a liver. From the looks of them they are probably not a pig's heart and pig's liver, but very likely human. Yang TieXin shouted: "What an evil Taoist bastard!" as he took out the dagger and thrust it towards the Taoist's chest.

The Taoist snickered: "Eagle Talon. So you want to fight now?" He lightly hit Yang TieXin's wrist with his left hand. Yang TieXin felt a numbing pain in his wrist as his fingers lost all their strength. Before he knew it, his dagger had been taken away.

Guo XiaoTian was shocked at the sight of the exchange. He knows that his adopted brother is a descendant of a renowned military general. The martial art skills that he has inherited from his ancestors are slightly better than his own. Yet the Taoist considers him nothing. The move that the Taoist just made is obviously the formidable skill of "Bare Hand Seizes Blade". It is a well known in the realm of the rivers and lakes <sup>ix</sup>. But he only heard about and not seen it until a moment ago. Thus concerned about his adopted brother's safety, Guo XiaoTian picked a wooden bench that he was sitting on. He will raise the bench to block if the Taoist tries to stab his sworn brother.

But the Taoist completely ignored them. He just wildly cut the human heart and liver to pieces with the dagger. Suddenly, he let out a huge roar, so loud that it rattled the tiles on the roof. He lifted up his right hand and brought it down hard, so hard that the contents on the table jumped at the impact. The two men looked over and saw he had just smashed the head's skull bones to smithereens; even the middle of the table was cracked. The two of them were still recovering when the Taoist shouted: "Shameless scoundrels, this humble Taoist today will have to really break the no-killing rule!"

Yang TieXin couldn't get any madder; he grabbed the iron spear that was leaning against a corner of the room and jumped outside. He shouted back: "Come on! Let's teach you a lesson in the art of the 'Yang Family Spear'!" The Taoist snickered a bit: "You think you are worthy enough to use the 'Yang Family Spear' based on all this fake bravado?" He walked out of the door as he was finishing the sentence.

Seeing the situation deteriorate to this point, Guo XiaoTian ran back to his house and got his double halberds. When he got back the Taoist was still standing there with his sword still in its sheath and his sleeves flapping noisily in the wind. Yang TieXin yelled out: "Unsheathe your sword!" The Taoist replied: "Even if the two of you come at me together, I would still fight you with my bare hands."

Yang TieXin made a gesture signaling that he is about to start and followed it with a 'Poisonous Dragon Coming Out from the Cave'. The red tassel on his spear shook, creating a huge flash of red heading towards the heart of the Taoist. The Taoist was briefly surprised and praised: "Excellent!" His body went along with the spear and dodged to the left. His left palm spun around and came up to meet the spearhead in an attempt to grab it.

Yang TieXin has worked hard with this spear since he was a little kid and had fully received his father's skills. The 'Yang Family Spear' is nothing to scoff at. Years back, Yang ZaiXin took a spear and three hundred Song soldiers into battle against forty thousand Jin soldiers at the Little Merchant Bridge. In the battle, they killed more than two thousand Jin soldiers, not to mention one commander of ten thousand men, as well as more than one hundred commanders of one thousand men and one hundred men. Actually, the Jin arrows came flying in like rain; as soon as he was hit by an arrow he would break the wooden part off and keep on fighting. At last his horse got tripped up in mud and he finally gave his life for his country. When the Jin army burned his body, the amount of melted metal from the arrowheads topped an amazing two jins <sup>x</sup>. This battle shocked and frightened the Jin army and made the 'Yang Family Spear' famous in all of Central Plains.

Although Yang TieXin is not as great as his forefathers, he does almost fully understand the spear skill inside out. So there he is, parrying, thrusting, swinging, flicking, blocking, fending, and obstructing. The point of the spear flashed silver, the tassel blurred red. What a spear skill!

Yang TieXin pulled out all the stops and his moves were swift and agile, changing and faking as if they were an illusion. But the Taoist's body followed the spear around, easily dodging forward and back, making him almost impossible to hit. After using all seventy-two stances of the 'Yang Family Spear', Yang TieXin couldn't help but be anxious and upset. He turned around and walked away carrying the spear backwards. As expected, the Taoist started to chase very close behind. Yang TieXin let out a big shout, held the spear with both hands, suddenly twisted his waist and extended his arms, and thrust the spear back right at the Taoist's face. This move was ferocious, for it is the move in 'Yang Family Spear' that is used to break an enemy formation and kill enemy generals, called the "Return Horse Spear". Back before Yang ZaiXin changed his allegiance to the Song army, when he battled Yue Fei, he used this exact move to kill Yue Fei's younger brother Yue Fan.

The Taoist, seeing that the spears had already arrived in front of him in an instant, couldn't help but praise: "Excellent move!" Smacking his hands together, he was able to clamp onto the spear point. Yang TieXin gave one mighty push, but spear did not move at all. Shocked, he tried with all his might to pull the spear back. But it seemed as if the spear was caught underneath a

mountain, with no chance at all of pulling it out. His face turned red as he tried three times more, but the spear still would not leave the Taoist's hands. The Taoist let out a hearty laugh; suddenly his right palm rose and with the speed of a lightning strike hit the handle of the spear. "Crack!" Yang TieXin felt the part between the base of his thumb and index finger go numb and hastily released the spear, letting it drop onto the snow covered ground.

The Taoist smiled and said: "You are really using the 'Yang Family Spear'. Sorry for any offense. Please honor me with knowing your surname." Yang TieXin still hadn't recovered from the shock of all this, so he replied without much thought: "My surname is Yang, given name is TieXin." The Taoist asked: "Are you related to General Yang, Yang ZaiXin?"

Yang TieXin answered: "He's my great grandfather."

The Taoist cupped his fist and saluted: "I mistook the two of you for scoundrels, turns out that you are descendants of patriots, please forgive me. May I be so bold as to ask this gentleman's surname?"

Guo XiaoTian answered: "Surname is Guo, given name is XiaoTian."

Yang TieXin added: "He's my martial brother, he is the descendant of Guo Sheng, one of the Heroes of the Water Margins of Mount Liang."

The Taoist replied: "Your humble Taoist acted rashly and rudely, please forgive me." Then he saluted again.

Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin both bowed and cupped their fist and saluted back: "No problem, no problem at all. Would Master Taoist please come in for three more bowls?" Yang TieXin quietly picked up his spear. The Taoist smiled and said: "Of course! I just got the urge to drink it up with you two."

Bao XiRuo was worried that her husband might get hurt, so she stood in the doorway anxiously observing. Seeing the three of them stop fighting and become friends, she felt greatly relieved and started to set the table back up.

After the three of them sat down, Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin asked the Taoist for his Taoist name. The Taoist replied: "My name is Qiu ChuJi..." Yang TieXin jumped up and shouted: "Ah Ya!" Guo XiaoTian was shocked as well: "Elder 'Eternal Spring' (Chang ChunZi)?"

Qiu ChuJi smiled and replied: "That's the name that my Taoist friends gave me, I do not dare to claim such a name."

Guo XiaoTian replied: “The hero elder ‘Eternal Spring’ of the QuanZhen Sect, I am honored to make your acquaintance!” The two of them threw themselves onto the floor and saluted.

Qiu ChuJi hurriedly helped them up and said while smiling: “I personally killed a traitor today. The government’s men were chasing me very closely, and you two gentlemen suddenly invited me in for a drink. This is the capital area and neither of you are normal farmers, so I became suspicious.”

Guo XiaoTian replied: “This martial brother of mine has always a temper. Before we entered he tried a hand move at Master Taoist, I think that probably furthered Master Taoist’s suspicion.” Qiu ChuJi agreed: “How could a normal farmer be that strong? I thought that you two gentlemen were dogs of the government who were waiting here, undercover, for me. That’s why I was so rude, too rash and rude.” Yang TieXin smiled and replied: “Can’t blame those who don’t know.” The three of them laughed heartily. After several rounds of drinks, Qiu ChuJi pointed at the head that is now in pieces on the floor: “This man’s name is Wang DaoQian, a traitor! Last year when the emperor sent him to pay respects to the Jin emperor on his birthday, this man actually started to collude with the Jin in their effort to invade the South. I chased him for ten days before finally getting him.” The other two men had long heard in the martial world of elder ‘Eternal Spring’ Qiu ChuJi’s amazing martial arts and heroic character. Seeing his patriotism at this moment, killing a traitor for the country, they admired him even more. The two of them seized the opportunity to ask him some questions about martial arts, Qiu ChuJi was only too happy to help.

Even though the ‘Yang Family Spear’ never met an enemy on the battlefield, when going up against a kung fu master, it seemed rather lacking. Although Qiu ChuJi’s inner and outer kung fu cannot be considered at the highest of levels, they are nevertheless of a very high level, how could Yang TieXin last umpteen moves against him? It turned out that Qiu ChuJi was surprised to see his skills, so he purposely yielded in order to make him use up all seventy-two moves of the ‘Yang Family Spear’ to make sure that it was authentic. If they were really going at it, Yang TieXin’s spear would have been knocked out of his hand in a few moves. At this point, Qiu ChuJi observed that the ‘Yang Family Spear’ was intended to be used on horseback; if used on foot, then one had to be more creative and imaginative and not use it in a rigid fashion. The two men could not stop nodding upon hearing this. The ‘Yang Family Spear’ has always been a skill of the Yang males, so even though Qiu ChuJi is very knowledgeable, he still did not fully understand the inner workings of the skill. So he asked Yang TieXin a few questions about it as well.

The three of them had their ears turn warm from the wine and were really hitting it off. Yang TieXin suggested: “We two brothers are really fortunate to

be able to meet Master Taoist today. Master Taoist, why don't you stay a couple of days?"

Qiu ChuJi was just going to answer before his face suddenly froze: "Someone is here for me. No matter what happens, you two stay inside and don't come out, understand?" The two men nodded. Qiu ChuJi picked up the human head, walked out of the door, jumped up in a tree, and hid among its leaves.

Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin didn't really understand his strange actions, there were no noises whatsoever other than the howling of the wind. After a while, there came faint hoof beats from the west. Yang TieXin thought: "The priest's ear is incredible." Then immediately his thoughts followed: "This Priest's kung fu is amazing, but compared with Qu San, who would come out on top?" After another while, the hoof beats got closer and closer. Finally, about twenty riders, all dressed in black, appeared out of the flying snow. Galloping, they arrived in front of the door.

The leader of the group suddenly pulled his horse to a stop and yelled out: "The footprints stop here. It looks like there's just been a fight." Several people behind him jumped off their horses and inspected the footprints in the snow.

The head of the pack ordered: "Search the house!" two more men jumped off their horse to knock on the door. Suddenly an object flew from the trees, hitting one of them on the head. The object was thrown with such an incredible amount of force that it smashed the skull of the man. The other men all started to yell and scream as several men surrounded the tree. One man picked up the object that was thrown and yelled in shock: "It's His Excellency Wang's head!"

The leader pulled out a saber and let out a loud yell. Quickly ten or so men surrounded the tree. He gave out another command and five men raised their bows and shot five arrows toward Qiu ChuJi.

Yang TieXin picked up his spear and was just about to go outside and help when Guo XiaoTian grabbed him and whispered: "Master Taoist Qiu told us not to go out. Besides, if he starts having trouble with their numbers, then it still won't be too late for us to help." Just as he finished, an arrow came screaming down from the top of the tree. Turned out Qiu ChuJi had dodged four of the arrows and caught the last one, and then he just threw the arrow back down like a throwing weapon. With a scream of "Ah!", one of the men in black was hit and fell off his horse. His body rolled into a bush and stopped.

Qiu ChuJi pulled out his sword and jumped down. The sword had just started flashing when two men were hit. The leader shouted out: "Bloody Taoist! It's you!" "Sha, sha, sha!" He made three short bows, and then his horse came forth as his saber came slashing through the wind. Qiu ChuJi's sword continued to

flash in the snow as two more men were hit and fell off their horse. Yang TieXin was awestruck, knowing that even if he practiced kung fu for ten more years, he still would not be able to even see such a sword clearly, much less fight back. If Qiu ChuJi wasn't holding back just then, he would have been a dead man by now.

Qiu ChuJi moved as if carried by the wind and now is fighting the rider with the saber. That man's saber skill was not bad, each move, be it a parry or a slash, came out ferociously. After fighting for a bit more, Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin both figured out that Qiu ChuJi was prolonging their duel on purpose so as to use openings and breaks to pick off the other opponents. He was doing this in order to kill every one of the enemy; if the leader was killed, the rest might just turn and run for their lives, making it impossible to kill all of them.

After more fighting, there were only six or seven of them left. The leader knew he was not good enough, so he turned and tried to escape. Qiu ChuJi reached out with his left hand and grabbed the horse's tail. With a slight pull, his body jumped off the ground. Before even landing on the back of the horse, his sword had already penetrated the man's back all the way out of his chest. Qiu ChuJi threw down the body, grabbed hold of the reins, and started to chase the others. Silver colored iron horse shoes danced in the snow as silver flashes of his sword danced in the air. Amidst the screams, one body followed another onto the ground. Blood stained the ground, which was covered in pure white snow, to a deep red.

Qiu ChuJi stopped and looked around. Seeing only several rider-less horses running off, he laughed heartily. Turning to the two men by the door, he waved and said: "How did you men like that?"

Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin had just opened the door and walked out, so they had not completely calmed down from what they just witnessed. Guo XiaoTian asked: "Master Taoist Qiu, who are these people?" Qiu ChuJi replied: "We'll know when we search their bodies."

Guo XiaoTian searched the body of that saber using man and found an official document. It turned out to be an order from that very Magistrate Zhao, who had pretended to be a dog, saying that the Ambassador from Jin has ordered that the Song government troops and Jin troops to work together to catch the man that murdered Wang DaoQian as soon as possible. Guo XiaoTian was just about to explode in rage when Yang TieXin yelled out. In his hand were some tags found on the bodies of some other men, the tags were written in the JurChen language. It meant that within this group of men, there were several Jin soldiers.

Guo XiaoTian spoke up: “The enemy soldiers can do whatever they want, including capturing and killing, within our borders, and our Song officials are actually obeying orders from their Ambassador! What kind of world is this?!” Yang TieXin sighed: “Even the Emperor of Great Song has to refer to himself as an official of the Jin emperor, so it’s no surprise that our officials and generals are becoming their servants as well.” Qiu ChuJi bitterly said: “We priests are supposed to be merciful and benevolent in our hearts and actions. But then we see a bunch of traitors and enemies that do nothing but add to the suffering of our people, and I could never be merciful nor benevolent.” The two other men replied at the same time: “You were right to kill them! They deserved to die!”

This small village did not have many people to begin with. Now with the blizzard blowing, nobody was coming out at night. Even if someone witnessed what just happened, they would have ran back home a long time ago. Who had enough guts to come out to inspect and ask questions? Yang TieXin took out shovels and hoes and the three of them buried all of the bodies in one big grave.

Bao XiRuo picked up a broom and started to sweep all traces of blood on the snow. After a while, the smell of blood went straight to her stomach. Her eyes went blank for a second as she let out a little moan and sat down on the snow-covered ground. Yang TieXin was shocked and immediately ran over to help her up, all the while asking over and over: “What’s the matter?” Bao XiRuo’s eyes were closed and she did not answer. Seeing her white face and feeling her cold hands, Yang TieXin just got more and more worried.

Qiu ChuJi came over, grabbed Bao XiRuo’s right wrist, and felt her pulse for a bit. Suddenly he burst out laughing and said: “Congratulations! Congratulations!”

Yang TieXin was quite taken aback and asked: “What?”

At this time Bao XiRuo suddenly woke up with a grunt. Seeing the three men standing around her, she can’t help but feel a little shy and immediately walked back into the house.

Qiu ChuJi said with a smile: “Your wife is pregnant!”

Yang TieXin couldn’t quite believe it and asked: “Really?”

Qiu ChuJi smiled and replied: “Of all the things I learned in my life, I take comfort in saying that I know a little something about only three things. First is medicine, I couldn’t master inner strength, but came into contact with a lot of medicinal and herbal knowledge because of that. The second thing is writing a

couple of messed up lines of poetry. The little cat-like tricks called kung fu that I know can only be placed third.”

Guo XiaoTian replied: “Master Taoist, if your kung fu can only be called ‘little cat-like tricks’, then we two brothers can only lay claim to ‘not even rat-like skills’!” The three of them finished burying the bodies while talking and laughing. After that they went back into the house and started on the food and drinks again. With all the Jin that Qiu ChuJi killed today, all of them felt great joy and excitement.

Thinking about his wife’s pregnancy, Yang TieXin could not stop smiling. He thought: “Master Taoist here knows poetry, then that means he excels in all facets.” So he suggested: “Brother Guo’s wife is pregnant as well. Could we bother the Master Taoist to think of two names?”

Qiu ChuJi thought for a bit and said: “Brother Guo’s child will be called Guo Jing, and Brother Yang’s child will be called Yang Kang. It doesn’t matter if they are boys or girls, they can still use these names.”

Guo XiaoTian replied: “Great! Master Taoist’s reminding us two to remember the disgrace of the Year of Jing Kang, the humiliating capture of the two emperors.”

Qiu ChuJi replied: “That’s right.”

He reached into his shirt, took out two daggers, and put them on the table. The pair of daggers are identical in every way with a green leather sheath, gold hand guard, and ebony handles. He picked up one of the daggers and carved the words “Guo Jing” on the dagger’s handle. Then he carved “Yang Kang” on the handle of the other dagger. He carved with great speed and quickness, faster than most people can write. Before Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin figured out what he was doing, he had already finished carving the words. Smiling, he said: “I do not have anything else worthy with me, only this pair of daggers. Why not leave them for the two kids?” The two men thanked him and took their respective daggers. When the daggers were unsheathed, a sinister coldness came from them. Their blades were obviously very sharp.

Qiu ChuJi explained: “This pair of daggers came into my possession by coincidence. Although they are sharp, their small design does not fit me at all. But the kids can use them to protect themselves. Ten years from now, if I’m lucky to be still in this world, I will come to this place again and teach the kids some kung fu. How does that sound?”

The two men could not be any happier and thanked him repeatedly. Qiu ChuJi concluded: “The Jin are occupying the north and torturing the people there.

This situation cannot last long. Gentlemen, please take care of yourselves.” He picked up his bowl of wine and downed it in one gulp. Then he got up and walked out of the door. Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin jumped up to try to invite him to stay. But his steps were fast and steady as he was already very far away.

Guo XiaoTian sighed: “Masters like him are always coming and going like the wind. We were lucky to make his acquaintance today, I was thinking of talking to him and asking for his views a bit more. But alas, it was not to be.” Yang TieXin smiled and replied: “Big Brother, at least Master Taoist Qiu was able to kill many Jin today and vented some of our anger for us as well.” He held up the dagger and unsheathed it again. Gently stroking the blade, he suddenly spoke up: “Big Brother, I have a stupid idea, tell me what you think of it?”

Guo XiaoTian asked: “What is it?”

Yang TieXin explained: “If both our kids are boys, then they will be sworn brothers. If they are girls, then they’ll be sworn sisters...”

Guo XiaoTian cut in: “And if it is a boy and a girl, then they’ll be husband and wife.” The two of them grabbed each other’s hand and laughed heartily.

Bao XiRuo came back out from the sleeping room, smiled, and asked: “What has made you two so happy?”

Yang TieXin repeated what they just said to her. Bao XiRuo blushed, but she was happy in her heart as well. Yang TieXin suggested: “Let’s trade daggers right now as a pledge to the engagement. If they turn out to be sworn brothers or sisters, we can still switch back. If they are a little couple...”

Guo XiaoTian joked: “Then I’m really very sorry, for both daggers would belong to my family then.”

Bao XiRuo laughed and replied: “You never know, maybe they will both belong to our family instead.” So the two men switched daggers right there. Actually, arranging marriages before a child is born happens very often, there was nothing unusual about it.

Guo XiaoTian took the dagger and happily ran back home to inform his wife. When Li Ping heard it she was quite happy as well.

Playing with the dagger and drinking by himself, Yang TieXin was drunk before he knew it. Bao XiRuo helped her husband onto the bed and collected the dishes and bowls. Noticing that it is quite late, she went out to the backyard and collected the chicken cages. As she was closing the back door, she

suddenly saw some drops of blood in the snow just in front of the door. Startled, she thought: "So not all of the blood was taken care off. If some official sees this, then we will all be in trouble." So she hurriedly grabbed a broom and started sweeping.

The drops of blood led all the way to the woods behind the house. There were also traces of someone crawling along in the snow. Bao XiRuo's suspicions rose as she followed the blood trail into the pine trees. She arrived behind an old grave and saw something black curled up on the ground.

Bao XiRuo walked closer for a better look. Turned out it was a corpse. The man was covered in black, obviously one of the men that came for Qiu ChuJi earlier. He probably didn't die right away after being wounded and crawled here. She was just about to go wake her husband to take care of this corpse when she suddenly thought: "What if someone came and saw him right at this moment?" So she summoned up her strength and went over to the corpse. She wanted to pull it into a bush close by and then go get her husband. But just as she gave a pull, the corpse suddenly twitched and groaned.

This scared the wits out of her, thinking it was a zombie; she wanted to turn around and run for her life. Yet it was as if her feet were nailed to the ground, she could not move at all. After a long wait, seeing that the corpse did not move again, she gently nudged it with her broom. The corpse groaned again, but this time much weaker. Only now did she realize that the person was still alive. She looked closer and saw that the back of his shoulder had been hit by a 'wolf fang' arrow. The arrow was embedded deep and the arrow shaft was covered in blood. Snow was still falling and there was already a thin layer of snow on his face. It would only be a little while longer before he is frozen to death.

She had always been kindhearted ever since she was little. If she saw an injured sparrow, frog, or even a bug, she just had to take it home and take care of it until it had fully recovered. Only then would she release it. If for some reason she couldn't nourish it back to health, she would be unhappy for an entire day. This little quirk of hers never changed with her age and led to her house ending up crawling with small critters of many kinds. Her father, being the time-tested country scholar that he was, gave her a name that went along with this personality of hers: XiRuo, meaning weak or compassionate. The Bao family in Red Plum Village had an unusually high number of old roosters and hens. This was because once Bao XiRuo had taken care of a chick; she would never allow it to be killed. If her parents wanted to eat one, they would have to go and buy one at the market. So the chickens that the family raised all lived to a very old age before dying. Because Yang TieXin loved this flower-like beauty that is his wife, he always went along with whatever she wanted. So naturally, the yard of the Yang house had become a haven for chickens, ducks and other little critters as well. The little chicks and ducklings have slowly grown to be adult chickens

and ducks. There weren't any old chickens or ducks because she hadn't been in this household for very long. But if things continued as they were, it would only be a matter of time.

Right now, seeing this man lying in the snow about to die, her kind heart started to react. Even though she clearly knew that this man was not good, she couldn't just watch him bleed and freeze to death. She hesitated for only a second before running back to the house to discuss this with her husband. But Yang TieXin was deep in sleep because of the wine, no matter what she did he wouldn't wake up.

Figuring that she should save the person first and then worry about the rest, she took out her husband's blood clotting powder. Grabbing a small dagger, some pieces of cloth, and half a jug of warm wine that was on the stove, she ran back to behind the grave. That man was still lying on the ground, not moving. Bao XiRuo helped him sit up and slowly poured the leftover wine in the jug into his mouth. She had been taking care of and curing animals ever since she was little, so she had a little bit of medical knowledge. The arrow had embedded itself deep inside of him, pulling it out might cause blood to shoot out of him and kill him. But if the arrow isn't pulled out, there will be no way to start taking care of the wound. So she gritted her teeth, cut open the flesh around the wound using the dagger, grabbed a hold of the arrow shaft, and gave one hard pull. The man let out a tortured scream and passed out. Blood shot out of the wound as Bao XiRuo's shirt was covered with little specks of blood, but that arrow had been pulled out. Bao XiRuo's heart was beating wildly as she anxiously and hurriedly applied the blood clotting powder onto the wound and firmly bandaged it with the pieces of cloth. After a while, the man slowly began to come around, but was too weak and tired to even make a sound.

Bao XiRuo had been frightened to the point that there was no way for her to gather up enough strength to help move this man. Suddenly an inspiration came to her, she went back home and grabbed a door plank. She dragged the man onto the door plank and then pulled the door plank along the snow, as if she was pulling a sled. She pulled him back into the house and set him up in the barn. After being fully occupied for so long, only now did she get the chance to calm down. She changed out of her bloodied shirt and washed her hands and face. She poured out a bowl of unfinished chicken soup, grabbed a candle, and went to the barn once again to check on the man. When she arrived the man's breathing was weak but steady. Bao XiRuo felt a little better and started feeding him the chicken soup. The man drank down half a bowl before suddenly breaking out in a violent coughing bout.

Startled, Bao XiRuo held up the candle for a closer look. Under the candlelight, she saw the man's delicate features and rather high bridged nose. He was actually a very handsome young man. Her face suddenly flushed and her left

hand shook, disturbing the candleholder and several drops of wax fell onto the man's face.

That man opened his eyes. In front of him was a face as beautiful as a flower, cheeks blushing red, and eyes like twinkling stars, filled with both sympathy and bashfulness. It was as if this was a dream and he couldn't help but become spellbound.

Bao XiRuo whispered: "Feeling any better? Here, drink the rest of this bowl of soup." That man tried to take the bowl in his hands, but he had no strength in his hands whatsoever and almost spilled it on himself. Bao XiRuo immediately grabbed the bowl back. At this time the most important thing is to save a life, so she fed him the soup little by little.

After drinking all of the soup, that man's eyes slowly gained back some life. He stared at her, obviously grateful beyond words. But Bao XiRuo was getting embarrassed by the stare. So she grabbed some straw, put it on him to keep him warm, and went back into the house with the candle.

She did not sleep well at all for the rest of the night and she had several nightmares in a row. Suddenly she would see her husband spearing that man to death. But then she would see that man killing her husband with a saber and then start to chase her; she was surrounded by darkness and had no where to run or hide. Several times she was frightened awake by her dreams and was covered with a cold sweat. When she woke up in the morning, her husband had already gotten up. Seeing him grinding the head of his spear, her dreams of last night came rushing back into her mind. She anxiously made her way to the barn and pushed open the door. Even more startling, there was nobody in the barn, only a messed up pile of straw. The man had disappeared.

She ran to the backyard and noticed the backdoor was only half-closed. The snow showed the traces of someone crawling and rolling toward the west. She stared at the traces and became lost in thought. After a long while, a gust of wind blew in her face as she suddenly felt a pain in her stomach and her legs felt weak. Sleepy, she walked back to the main room. Yang TieXin had already made some porridge and put it on the table. Smiling, he said: "See, my porridge isn't that bad after all." Bao XiRuo knew that her husband is being even more considerate because of her condition. She smiled, sat down, picked up the bowl, and started to eat the porridge. She figured that if she told her husband about what happened last night, he would be jealous and angry. He would no doubt chase the man down and kill him. Wouldn't that be the same as her killing the man? So she decided to never mention it ever.

Winter ended and spring returned. In a blink of an eye several months had passed. Bao XiRuo's stomach slowly got bigger and she began to feel more and

more tired. The incident of that night when she saved a man gradually slipped from her memory.

On this particular day, the Yang family had just finished dinner and Bao XiRuo was sitting by a lamp working on a new pair of trousers for her husband. Yang TieXin was hanging up on the wall the two pairs of straw sandals he just finished. Remembering that he broke the head of the plough while working in the fields earlier that day, he turned to Bao XiRuo and said: "The head of the plough is broken. Tomorrow I'll go to Zhang Mu'Er on the east side of the village and have him add a bit of iron and take care of it."

Bao XiRuo replied: "Alright."

Yang TieXin looked at her and said: "I have enough clothing already. Your body is weak and is carrying a baby, you should rest as much as you can. Don't worry about making clothes for me anymore."

Bao XiRuo turned her head towards him and smiled, but her hands did not stop. Yang TieXin walked over and gently took the needle and thread out of her hand. Only then did Bao XiRuo let out a yawn, blew out the lamp, and went to bed.

At midnight, Bao XiRuo was suddenly snapped out of her dreams by the sound of her husband sitting up. Faint sounds of hoof beats could be heard coming from very far away. The sound came from the west. After a while, hoof beats started coming from the east and followed by sounds coming from north and south. Bao XiRuo sat up and asked: "How come there are horses in all four directions?" Yang TieXin jumped out of the bed and started to put on cloths. Soon, the hoof beats were getting closer from all four directions and the dogs in the village started to bark.

Yang TieXin replied: "We are surrounded!"

Shocked, Bao XiRuo asked: "What for?"

Yang TieXin replied: "I don't know." He handed the dagger that Qiu ChuJi gave him to his wife and said: "Take this, to protect yourself!" He took down a spear from the wall and firmly held it in his hands. By now the horse neighs and the human voices from all four directions were loud and chaotic. Yang TieXin opened up a window and looked outside. A group of soldiers, with torches in hand, had already surrounded the entire village. Seven or eight of them were galloping back and forth on horseback.

The soldiers shouted as one: "Catch the traitors, don't let them get away!" Yang TieXin thought to himself: "Are they here to catch Qu San? I haven't

seen him around recently. Luckily he isn't here, otherwise there is no way he could beat all of these soldiers, no matter how great his kung fu is." Suddenly one of the men on a horse shouted: "Guo XiaoTian, Yang TieXin. You two traitors come out now and get what's coming to you!"

This shocked Yang TieXin and Bao XiRuo's face turned white. Yang TieXin whispered to her: "I don't know what's gotten into the authorities, they only know how to malign us normal citizens. We won't stand a chance with them. The only thing we can do is run for our lives. Don't panic, with this spear of mine, I can assure you that we'll get out of here." His kung fu was good and had made a living in the martial world before. So even though he was in grave danger, he did not panic. He put a bow and arrow bag onto his back and grabbed his wife's right hand.

Bao XiRuo spoke up: "I'll pack."

Yang TieXin replied: "Pack what? We are leaving everything!"

Bao XiRuo's heart suddenly trembled as tears rolled down her cheeks. She said in the shaking voice: "What's going to happen to our home?"

Yang TieXin answered: "All we need to do is to survive. We can start another home somewhere else."

Bao XiRuo asked: "What about these little chicks and ducklings and cats?"

Yang TieXin sighed: "Silly, why are you still worrying about them?" After a pause, he tried to console her: "Why would the authorities bother the little chicks, ducklings and cats?"

Just as he finished his sentence, the light from the torches outside fluttered. The soldiers had just lit two thatched cottages on fire. Two more foot soldiers were heading this way with torches to light this house on fire, all the while shouting: "Guo XiaoTian, Yang TieXin. If the two of you don't come out now, we'll burn all of Ox Family Village down to the ground!"

Yang TieXin had about all he could take, so he opened up the door and walked out. He shouted at the top of his lungs: "I am Yang TieXin! What do you people want?"

The two foot soldiers were shocked and they dropped their torches, turned around, and ran back. In the firelight, an officer rode forth on his horse and shouted: "Good, so you are Yang TieXin. Come with us to the magistrate. Seize him!" At once four or five foot soldiers ran up. Yang TieXin twirled his spear, swung a 'White Rainbow in the Sky' move, and swept three of the

soldiers onto the ground. He followed it up with the ‘Madly Deafening Spring Thunder’ move as he picked up a soldier by the spear shaft and threw him into the crowd. He shouted: “If you want to arrest me, first tell me what crimes I committed.”

The officer shouted back: “Traitor! How dare you resist arrest?”

Even though he was calling him names, he nevertheless feared his foe’s courage as well as skill and was afraid to get any closer. Another man on horseback behind him shouted: “Just come with us to the courthouse peacefully, that way there won’t be more punishments added to your crimes. We have the official document for your arrest here.”

Yang TieXin replied: “Let me see it!”

The officer replied: “What about the other traitor, Guo XiaoTian?”

Guo XiaoTian stuck half his body out of the window, aimed his bow and arrow at the military officer, and shouted, “Here is Guo XiaoTian.” The officer became frightened. As a chill ran down his spine, he said, “Put down your arrow. I will read the warrant out to you.” “Read it quickly!” said Guo Xiaotian in a stern voice as he pulled the arrow-laden string of his bow even more tightly.

Left without any alternatives, the officer opened the warrant and read it out in a loud voice: “The twin criminals, residents Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin of Ox Family Village in the Prefecture of Lin’An, colluded with traitors and criminals with intentions of wrong doing. Although their schemes did not materialize, they must be immediately taken for interrogation and strictly dealt with according to the law.” “Which government office did the warrant come from?” asked Guo XiaoTian.

“It came personally from Chancellor Han,” answered the officer.

Both Guo XiaoTian and Yang TieXin were shocked: What could be so important that Chancellor Han TuoZhou should issue the warrant personally? Could it be that Master Taoist Qiu’s actions that night were discovered?

“Who is the complainant?” asked Guo XiaoTian again. “What evidence do you have?”

“We are only responsible for taking you into arrest,” answered the officer. “You can go with us and plead your case at the Office of the Prefect.”

“Chancellor Han specializes in harming good and innocent people,” shouted Yang TieXin. “Is there anyone who does not know this? We will not fall for this trap.”

“Disobeying orders and resisting arrest will add to your offences,” declared the officer. <sup>xi</sup>

Yang TieXin turned to his wife and said, “Hurry, put on a few additional pieces of clothing. I will seize his horse for you. When I shoot the officer down, his subordinates will naturally be lost for direction.” Almost at once, the sound of the bowstring was heard. An arrow flew through the air like a meteor and stuck the officer on the right shoulder. The officer let out an “Ai-Yo!” before tumbling down onto the ground. All the soldiers shouted in surprise. Another officer shouted: “Seize them!” All the soldiers came rushing forth. The two men were shooting arrows one after another and in an instant, they had already shot down six or seven soldiers. But there were too many of them and they still managed to charge to the front of both houses.

With a loud shout, Yang TieXin jumped out of the door with his spear making the soldiers back up in surprise and fear. He jumped to the side of an official that was riding a white horse and thrust the spear at him. The official tried to parry with his spear but the ‘Yang Family Spear’ was too fast; Yang TieXin’s spear flashed down and hit the official on his leg. He then lifted his spear up and flipped the official off his horse.

Yang TieXin put his spear shaft on the ground and pushed off, jumping onto the horse. He squeezed his legs, making the horse neigh and gallop towards the house. Yang TieXin killed a soldier by the door with a thrust, leaned down, extended his arms, picked Bao XiRuo, and placed her on the back of the horse as well. He then turned and shouted: “Big Brother, come with me!” Protecting Li Ping with his pair of halberds, Guo XiaoTian began fighting his way out. Seeing the ferocity of the two men, none of the soldiers dared to get any closer. So they started to shoot arrows at them.

Yang TieXin made his horse run to Li Ping’s side and shouted as he jumped off: “Sister, get on!” Li Ping anxiously said: “That won’t be any good.” Yang TieXin didn’t care what she said and threw her onto the horse. The two sworn brothers followed behind the horse and slowly walked off while battling off the soldiers.

After a bit of walking, they suddenly heard loud shouting coming from ahead as another group of soldiers came charging in. The two men silently groaned. As they were looking for another direction to run, arrows started coming in from ahead. Suddenly, Bao XiRuo screamed: “Ai-Yo!” Her horse was hit by an arrow and it fell over, throwing the two women on its back off. Yang TieXin

said: "Brother, you guard them; I'll go get another horse." He charged toward the crowd of soldiers. Ten or so soldiers lined up, pointed their spears at Yang TieXin, and let out a yell together.

Noting the sheer strength of the soldiers, Guo XiaoTian thought: "It is not difficult for my brother and me to escape on our own, but since we are hemmed in by the enemy, there is no way that we can rescue our wives too. We have not broken any laws, so instead of dying for nothing, we may as well go and explain ourselves at the Office of the Lin'An Prefect. When the Taoist Qiu killed those soldiers from the government and the Jin forces, he did not let any of them go. Since the dead cannot bear witness, the Prefect will not be able to prosecute us for any crimes. Furthermore, those soldiers were not killed by my brother and me." Thus, he raised his voice and said, "Brother, stop the killing! Let us go with them!"

Stunned, Yang TieXin withdrew his spear and ran back. The military officer who was in charge of the proceedings gave an order to halt the shooting of arrows, and commanded his men to surround their targets. "Put down your weapons, bows and arrows, and have your lives spared," he said.

"Brother, do not fall for their ploy!" said Yang TieXin.

However, Guo XiaoTian shook his head and threw his pair of halberds to the ground. Yang TieXin looked at his wife and saw that she had become pale with fear. Unwilling to frighten his beloved further, he sighed and threw his iron spear, bow and arrows to the ground. As soon as both of their weapons fell on the ground, ten or so long spears immediately came and surrounded the four of them. Eight soldiers went up to them and tied the four of them up with their hands behind their backs. Yang TieXin laughed sarcastically and turned his head away.

The military officer who was in charge of the proceedings raised his whip and struck Yang TieXin across the face. "How dare you, damn traitor!" he shouted. "Are you really not afraid of death?"

A welt appeared on Yang TieXin's face from his forehead all the way down to his neck. In rage, Yang TieXin replied: "Ok! What is your name?"

That official got even madder as his whip came down like rain: "This old man is Duan TianDe! Remember that? When you get to the gates of hell you can tell them all about me!" Yang TieXin did not back down or flinch as he stood there staring at him. Duan TianDe continued: "I got a knife scar on my forehead and a birthmark on my face! Can you remember all that?" His whip came down again.

Seeing her husband being treated like this, Bao XiRuo cried out while tears rolled down her cheeks: “He’s a good man and has done nothing wrong. Why are you... you beating him? Don’t... Don’t you know anything about justice?”

Yang TieXin suddenly spit at him, hitting him on the face. Furious, Duan TianDe pulled out his saber and screamed: “I’m going to kill you traitor, right now!” He brought his saber up and swung it down. Yang TieXin sidestepped the strike. The two foot soldiers by him pushed their spears up against his sides to stop him from moving as Duan TianDe chopped down once again. With nowhere to dodge on the sides, Yang TieXin could only jump back to avoid the strike. It turned out this Duan TianDe knows a little bit of kung fu, even though he missed again, he immediately thrust his saber forward. The saber he was using was saw-toothed and with his move he sawed a gash on Yang TieXin’s left shoulder. He then immediately followed it with another chop.

Seeing that his sworn brother’s life was in grave danger, Guo XiaoTian got to his feet and sent a foot towards Duan TianDe’s chest. In shock, Duan TianDe brought his sword back to parry this away. Even though Guo XiaoTian’s hands were tied behind his back, his footwork was still quite formidable. So before his body fell down, he twirled his left leg and brought it back and at the same time sent out his right leg, hitting Duan TianDe in his stomach.

In extreme pain and rage, Duan TianDe shouted: “Stick those spears in them! Orders from above, if the traitors resist arrest, kill them all!” The soldiers thrust with their spears. Guo XiaoTian managed to strike another two soldiers down with his kicks, yet the effectiveness his movements were affected by the fact that his hands were still tied behind his back as he had to jump away from the spears. Duan TianDe came up from behind him and swung down hard, chopping Guo XiaoTian’s entire right arm off at the shoulders. Yang TieXin was trying to struggle out of the ropes but could not, no matter how hard he tried. Suddenly seeing his sworn brother wounded on the ground, a surge of strength came from somewhere inside him and he snapped the ropes from his body, punched a soldier, grabbed his spear, and whipped out the ‘Yang Family Spear’. This time he was fighting without regard for his own life; it was as if he could take on tens of thousands of soldiers all by himself. He had just started but had already taken down two soldiers.

Seeing that the situation had turned, Duan TianDe immediately backed away. The last time, Yang TieXin was holding back somewhat, not really wanting to kill government soldiers; but now he could not care less. Flicking right and swinging left, he killed several soldiers in an instant. Seeing his ferociousness, the rest of the soldiers scattered at once.

Yang TieXin did not bother chasing them as he helped his sworn brother sit up. Blood was gushing from where Guo XiaoTian’s arm was chopped off and by

now his whole body was covered in blood. Yang TieXin could not stop tears from falling at the sight. Guo XiaoTian gritted his teeth and shouted: “Brother, don’t bother about me... hurry, leave now!” Yang TieXin replied desperately: “I’m going to get a horse, and then I’m going to fight until I die to make sure you escape.” Guo XiaoTian faintly replied: “No... no...” He passed out. Yang TieXin took off his outer shirt and tried to bandage Guo XiaoTian's wounds with it, but the saber-slash from Duan TianDe had cut him from the shoulder all the way across the chest. There was no way to bandage a wound of that size. Guo XiaoTian slowly regained consciousness and shouted: “Brother, go and rescue your wife and your sister-in-law, I ... I will ... not be able to make it ...” Before he finished what he was saying, he slumped over and died.

The two sworn brothers always thought of each other as real blood brothers. Seeing his brother die like this, a phrase popped up amidst the anger and the rage in Yang TieXin’s mind. It is the phrase that they said when they became sworn brothers: “Hope to die on the same day of the same month of the same year.” He lifted his head up to look around. The two wives had gone missing in all the chaos. He screamed: “Brother, I’m going to avenge your death!” He grabbed his spear and ran toward the crowd of soldiers. By now, the soldiers had already lined up in formation. Duan TianDe issued an order and immediately arrows flew towards him. Yang TieXin did not care, as he knocked the arrows out of the way and charged ahead. An official swung the saber in his hand down hard at Yang TieXin’s head. Yang TieXin ducked and suddenly scrambled underneath the belly of his horse. That official was just about to turn his horse around when a spear penetrated through his heart from the back. Yang TieXin threw off the corpse and jumped onto the horse. Waving his spear around, none of the soldiers dared to come closer to battle and they started to run off.

After chasing for a while, he suddenly saw an official running away as fast as he could with a woman in his arms. Yang TieXin jumped off his horse and knocked down a foot soldier. Picking up the soldier’s bow and arrow, he aimed the best he could in the dim fire light and let loose. The arrow hit the horse’s behind, making the horse kneel down all of the sudden. The two people on the horse came tumbling off. Yang TieXin let loose another arrow and killed the official. Running up he saw that the woman on the ground, who was now trying to sit up, is his wife.

Overwhelmed with surprise and excitement upon seeing her husband, Bao XiRuo jumped into his arms. Yang TieXin asked: “Where’s our sister-in-law?” Bao XiRuo answered: “Ahead, with... with more soldiers.” Yang TieXin instructed: “You stay here and wait for me. I’m going to save her.” Bao XiRuo suddenly said in shock: “But there are more soldiers coming from behind!”

Yang TieXin turned around and, as she had said, there really was a group of soldiers coming this way with torches in hand. Yang TieXin gritted his teeth and said: "Brother is dead. No matter what, I have to save sister-in-law to save the Guo family bloodline. If the heavens pity us, there will be a day when we meet again."

Bao XiRuo put her arms around her husband's neck and would not let go. She said in between sobs: "We'll never be apart, you said it yourself, even if we die we will die together! Remember? You said it yourself!" Yang TieXin's heart went sour for a moment as he picked up his wife and gave her a kiss. Then despite every part of his heart not wanting to, he shook free of her arms and charged forward with his spear. After charging for ten steps he turned around and saw that his wife was sobbing in a cloud of dust and the soldiers had already arrived at her side.

Wiping away the sweat, blood, and tears on his face, Yang TieXin threw his consideration for own life out and thought only about saving Li to make sure that his sworn brother had descendants. After chasing for a while, he got another horse. After grilling an official, he found out that Li was just a bit ahead. So he raced on as hard as he could on the horse. Suddenly, he heard the cries and screams of a woman coming from the woods by the path. He immediately turned the horse and charged into the woods. Li had freed her hands from the ropes and was desperately fighting off two foot soldiers. Being born and raised on the farm, she was very strong for a girl; so although she did not know any martial arts, her desperate fighting was quite tough to handle. The two foot soldiers were cursing and laughing at her, but, at the moment, still could not quite handle her. Yang TieXin did not bother to say anything and just charged up and killed the two soldiers with two thrusts. He then helped Li up onto the horse. The two of them rode back together, trying to find his wife. When they got back to the place where they parted ways, nobody was there. By now the sky is getting slightly brighter, so he jumped off the horse to inspect the ground. There were traces of someone being dragged away; his wife was probably captured by the soldiers again.

Yang TieXin immediately jumped up onto the horse and gave the horse several wild kicks in the stomach. In great pain, the horse shot forward. Just as they were galloping at full speed, a bugle suddenly sounded to the side of the path and ten or so warriors clad in black charged out. The first one lifted up his 'wolf fang' club and smashed down. Yang TieXin parried it with his spear and answered with a thrust. That man replied by swinging his club sideways. His club techniques were very unique, as if it wasn't a skill from the Central Plains.

When Yang TieXin and Guo XiaoTian used to discuss martial arts and its techniques, they talked about one of the Heroes of the Water Margins, Thunderclap Fire Qing Ming, who used to be the best in the world in 'wolf

fang' club techniques. But outside of him, it was very rare to meet someone in the martial world who uses this weapon. Because of the sheer weight of the weapon, it required that the user had to have enormous upper back strength. However, the Jin army loved to use this weapon. This was because the Jin people lived in the freezing cold climate of LiaoDong, so they were all very strong. When using this weapon on the battlefield, its heaviness gave them a distinct advantage. Back when the Jin invaded and defeated the Song armies using the 'wolf fang' club, the rage and anger of the peasants and farmers, resulted in a joke that went around. The first person said: "What's so scary about the Jin army? For any one thing they have, we have one thing to counter them." The second person responded: "They've got Acute." The first replied: "We've got Protector Han." The second went on: "They've got Crippled Horse." The first replied: "We got Thin Coarse Saber." The second said: "They've got the 'wolf fang' club." To which the first replied: "We've got the crown of our heads." Meaning that when 'wolf fang' club comes down, the farmers of Song could only meet it with the top of their heads. This joke is actually filled with bitterness and anger.

By now Yang TieXin had fought several exchanges with this man with the 'wolf fang' club. Remembering his discussion with Guo XiaoTian, he became more and more suspicious. From the moves and techniques of this man, it was obvious that he was a Jin army official. What's he doing here? Several more exchanges passed when he suddenly quickened his spear moves and stabbed the man off his horse. The rest of them turned around and ran in shock.

Yang TieXin turned around to check up on whether or not Li was hurt in that last fight. Suddenly an arrow was shot out from the woods. It caught Yang TieXin by surprise and hit him from behind. In utter panic, Li shouted: "Brother Yang, arrow! Arrow!" Yang TieXin's heart went cold: "So this is when and where I die! But I have to at least disperse these bastard soldiers before I die, that way sister-in-law can get away." So he waved his spear wildly and charged straight at an area crowded with soldiers. But the pain from the arrow in his back was too much and his eyes lost focus as he fainted.

Back when her husband pushed her away, Bao XiRuo felt as if her heart had been shredded. In a blink of an eye the soldiers made it to her side. Before she had time to run away, she was already tied up and thrown onto a horse. One of the army officials brought a torch up to her face and gave her a good look-over. Nodding, he said: "Hard to believe those two bastards could actually do a thing or two, and wounded so many of our men." Another official smiled and said: "Well, finally we can call an end to it and a job well done. After all that trouble, I would have to say that everyone deserves at least ten taels, or more, of silver each."

The first official replied: “Hmph! Let’s hope the higher ups don’t take it all for themselves.” Turning around, he instructed the bugler: “Let’s head back!” The bugler brought up his bugle and blew several notes.

Bao XiRuo could only sob because all she could think about was her husband and whether or not he’s still alive. By now the sky had brightened up somewhat and people are slowly appearing on the path. Seeing a group of soldiers, all of the farmers quickly got out of the way as far as they could. At first Bao XiRuo was worried that the soldiers might get ideas about her; but surprisingly these men actually were polite in their actions and words, so she slowly stopped worrying about it.

After several li, shouts suddenly came from ahead as ten or so armed men dressed in black came charging in from the side of the path. The leader of the group yelled: “Shameless scum! Killing good innocent people! Come down here at once and get what’s coming to you!”

The leading official was furious and shouted back: “Who do you think you dogs are, making trouble here in the outskirts of the capital? Get out of the way, now!” The gang of men in black did not reply as they charged into the soldiers. Even though there were more soldiers than they, the men in black were all well versed in kung fu, so neither side seemed to have gained an advantage for the moment.

Bao XiRuo was silently excited as she thought to herself: “Maybe Dear Tie’s friends heard the news and came to rescue us.” In the chaos of battle an arrow came flying in and hit the butt of the horse she was on. Driven by the pain, the horse ran off as fast as it could to the north. In utter shock, Bao XiRuo grabbed hold of the horse’s neck with both arms in fear of falling off. The sound of hoof beats came as another horse chased up from behind. In an instant a black horse overtook her. The man on the horse twirled a lasso in the air a couple of times and skillfully tossed it around her horse’s neck. The two horses galloped side-by-side. The man slowly shortened the lasso and together, the two horses gradually slowed down. After several more steps, the man whistled and the black horse immediately stopped dead in its tracks. Because of the lasso, Bao XiRuo’s horse could not continue forward and reared up on its hind legs, neighing loudly.

Bao XiRuo had been worn out by the events of the night. In a mixture of sadness and horror, she could no longer hang on to the reins. She fell off the horse and fainted.

After sleeping for what seemed like forever, she slowly woke up. It felt like she was sleeping on a very soft and comfortable bed with a thick cotton quilt over her; she felt warm all over. She opened her eyes and the first thing that she saw

was the green colored canopy of a bed, as it turned out, she really was sleeping on a bed. A lamp was lit on the table by the bed and it seemed like there was a man dressed in black sitting by the bed. Hearing her turn, that man immediately stood up, parted the bed curtains, and quietly asked: "Are you awake?" Bao XiRuo hadn't completely recovered her consciousness; all she could tell was that this man was somewhat familiar. The man placed his hand on her forehead and gently said: "Still very hot, don't worry; the doctor will be here soon." In a daze, Bao XiRuo slowly fell back to sleep.

After a while, it seemed like a doctor was examining her and then someone was feeding her medicine. After that, all she could do was sleep. She snapped out of a dream and screamed: "Dear Tie! Dear Tie!" This was followed by someone patting her softly on the shoulder and gently consoling her.

The next time she woke up it was in the middle of the day and she couldn't help but groan. A person walked up and parted the bed curtains. This time as they faced each other, Bao XiRuo saw the face clearly. She was shocked; for this handsome, smiling man in front of her was the very man she'd saved from certain death in the snow several months ago.

Bao XiRuo asked: "Where am I? Where's my husband?"

The young man waved his hand, telling her not to be loud and then lightly replied: "The soldiers are outside looking all over the place. Right now we are borrowing a room at a farmer's place. I'm very sorry, I had to lie and say that I am your husband, please don't accidentally tell them the truth."

Bao XiRuo blushed and nodded, but she asked again: "Where's my husband?"

The man answered: "Your body is very weak right now. After you get better, then I'll tell you everything."

Bao XiRuo was shocked and from his tone of voice, it seemed like something had happened to her husband. She grabbed the corner of her quilt tightly with both hands and asked in a shaking voice: "He... What... What happened to him?"

The man only replied: "Worrying will accomplish nothing now. The most important thing is your health."

Bao XiRuo kept on asking: "Is... Is he dead?"

The man's face showed that he realized he had no choice in the matter so he gently nodded: "Mr. Yang was killed by those bastard soldiers." He shook his

head and sighed. Bao XiRuo felt as if her heart was being torn and she fainted. When she came to after a long time, she started crying her eyes out.

That man gently consoled her. In between sobs, Bao XiRuo asked: “He... How did he die?”

That man replied: “Was Mr. Yang a tall, broad-shouldered man around the age of twenty, and uses a spear as a weapon?”

Bao XiRuo answered: “Yes, that’s him.” That man answered: “Earlier today I saw him fighting with several soldiers, killing a couple of them. But... ay! But one of the army officers snuck behind him and stabbed him squarely in the back with his spear.”

Bao XiRuo fainted again. She did not drink nor eat for that entire day as she felt obligated to die with her husband. The man didn’t try to force her either and he just talked to her in a very gentlemanly manner to keep her company. As this continued Bao XiRuo started to feel as if she was neglecting him, so she asked: “What is your name? How did you know that we were in trouble and come to help?”

The man replied: “My surname is Yan, given name is Lie. My friends and I were just passing by yesterday, when we saw soldiers causing trouble. We didn’t like what we saw so we decided to help. Who knew that I would end up rescuing my savior? It was as if we were destined to meet like this.”

Hearing the words “destined to meet”, Bao XiRuo’s face turned a little red as she tried to ignore him by turning her face away. She thought about all this in her head for a while. Suddenly something suspicious popped up in her mind as she found a hole in his story. She turned and asked: “Are you on the same side as the soldiers?”

Yan Lie was shocked: “Wh... What?”

Bao XiRuo explained: “Back on that day, weren’t you with the soldiers that tried to catch that Taoist Priest? That’s why you were injured right?”

Yan Lie answered: “Such bad luck on that day. I came from up north and was heading for Lin’An, passing by your village. Who was to know that an arrow was going to come out of nowhere and hit me in the shoulder? If it wasn’t for your benevolent heart and kindness I really would have died without even knowing why or how. Why were they after that Taoist Priest anyways? Taoist Priests catch ghosts, but soldiers catch Taoist Priests, what kind of logic is that?” When he got to that point he couldn’t help but laugh a little.

Bao XiRuo observed: “Oh, so you were just passing by and were not with them. I thought you were one of the people that were there to catch the Taoist. I really didn’t know whether or not I should have saved you.” She then went on to explain why the soldiers were there and how Qiu ChuJi killed them all.

After talking for a while, Bao XiRuo suddenly noticed that he was staring at her with an entranced gaze and immediately stopped talking. This snapped Yan Lie out of his trance, he smiled and said: “Sorry. I was just thinking about how we can escape without being caught by the soldiers.”

Bao XiRuo started to cry and replied: “My... My husband is gone now, how can I live on? Why don’t you just escape by yourself and not worry about me?”

Yan Lie replied with a straight face: “Madame, your husband was murdered by those bastard soldiers; his death has not been avenged. Yet you are not trying to bring the culprits to justice and are only seeking death. Your husband was a hero among men when he was alive, I’m afraid he won’t rest in peace when he finds out about this in the underworld.”

Bao XiRuo replied: “I’m only a weak female, how can I possibly avenge his death?”

In anger, Yan Lie replied: “Madame’s burden, I will gladly take upon my shoulders. Do you know who the culprit is?”

Bao XiRuo thought for a bit and answered: “The leader of the soldier’s name is Duan TianDe. He has a knife scar on his forehead and a birthmark on his face.”

Yan Lie replied: “With a name and a way of recognizing him, no matter how far away he runs off, we have to bring him to justice!” He went outside and came back with a bowl of porridge with some salted eggs. He spoke up: “If you don’t take care of your health, how can you get your revenge?” Bao XiRuo thought what he said made some sense, so she took the bowl and started to slowly eat its contents.

The next morning, Bao XiRuo arranged her clothes and got off of bed. She brushed her hair properly in front of a mirror, found a piece of white cloth and placed a white flower in her hair to pay respects to her husband. What she saw in the mirror was a beautiful woman in the prime of her life, yet her husband had already left her behind. Overwhelmed by sadness and loneliness, she put her head down and started crying. Yan Lie walked in and saw her. He said softly: “The soldiers are gone now, let’s go.” Bao XiRuo followed him out. Yan Lie gave a bit of silver to the master of the house and then led two horses over. The horse that Bao XiRuo had ridden on was hit by an arrow, but Yan Lie had taken care of the wound.

Bao XiRuo asked: "Where do we go to now?" Yan Lie gave her a look, signaling her not to talk so much in front of others. He helped her onto the horse and the two of them rode side-by-side northward. After riding for many li, Bao XiRuo asked again: "Where do we go now?" Yan Li replied: "Let's find a place where we can settle down for a while and wait out this storm. After the soldiers stop looking for us and let their guard down, then I'll go and find your husband's body so we can give him a proper burial. After that I'm going to find that bastard Duan TianDe and kill him."

Bao XiRuo had a very tender and selfless personality; rarely did she come up with ideas of her own. Besides, right now she's all by herself in the world, and seeing that he had it all figured out, she could not help but be touched. She said: "Mr. Yan, how... how will I ever be able to repay you?"

Yan Lie confidently replied: "Madame, this life of mine was saved by you. Even if I have to jump into boiling oil or be smashed into dust, I will serve you for the rest of my life."

Bao XiRuo replied: "I only hope that we can avenge my husband's death and kill that evil Duan TianDe as soon as possible so I can join him on the other side." When she had that thought, tears started to roll from of her eyes again. The two of them rode for the rest of the day and then stopped at a little inn in Chang'An for the night. Yan Lie put the two down as a couple and got one room. Bao XiRuo could not help but feel that there was something wrong about this. She did not utter a word during dinner and she secretly touched the dagger that Qiu ChuJi gave her to make sure it's there. She made up her mind: "If he gets any ideas, I will kill myself right there on the spot."

Yan Lie instructed the floor manager to bring him two bundles of straw into the room. He waited until the floor manager left before locking the door and laying out the straw on the floor. He lay down on the straw and covered himself with a felt blanket. He turned to Bao XiRuo: "Goodnight Madame." And then he closed his eyes.

Bao XiRuo's heart was beating a mile a minute. Remembering her dead husband, she felt all torn up inside. She blankly sat there for over an hour before finally sighing and blowing out the candle. Still clutching the dagger tightly, she climbed onto the bedding with her clothes on.

When Bao XiRuo woke up the next day, Yan Lie had already packed and readied everything, as well as instructing the floor manager to get some breakfast ready. Bao XiRuo was very thankful for his gentlemanly actions and let most of her guard down. By the time she ate breakfast, she noticed that there was a dish of chicken fried noodles, a dish of ham, a dish of sausages, a dish of smoked fish, and a small pot of deliciously smelling rice and stock gruel. She

was raised in a moderately well off family. Even after marrying into the Yang family, she had always led the life of typical farmer. Usually, breakfast for her was a couple of salted vegetables and half a salted egg. Other than the New Year and weddings, she had never eaten such delicacies. As a result she felt quite uncomfortable during the breakfast.

Once she finished eating, the floor manager came in with a bundle. By now Yan Lie had left them room. Bao XiRuo asked: "What is this?" The floor manager replied: "Mister went out as soon as the sun rose and bought a change of clothing for Madame. He told me to ask you to change into it." Once he finished he put down the bundle and left. Bao XiRuo opened the bundle and was shocked. It was a completely white mourning dress made out of silk with matching white socks, shoes, inner garments, and jacket. Also included were a matching scarf, bandanas, and other accessories. She thought: "It's hard for a young man like him to think of everything." When she changed into the clothing, she thought that Yan Lie bought these himself made her blush. She had left her home in a hurry in the middle of the night, so her clothing was not very neat to begin with. After a whole night of misadventures, she was covered in dirt and sweat. Now that she had cleaned up somewhat, her spirits picked up somewhat as well. When Yan Lie returned, she noticed he had changed into colorful and expensive attire as well.

The two of them got on their way again. Sometimes one of them rode in front while the other one followed, other times they rode side-by-side. The season of spring was in its full glory south of the YangTze; willows brushed people's shoulder on the road, flower fragrances filled the air and people's hearts. Now plants were starting to sprout on the farms.

In order to distract her thoughts and ease her troubled mind, Yan Lie kept on talking to her about various random subjects. Bao XiRuo's father was an unaccomplished scholar in a little village, her husband and his sworn brother were both straightforward and unrefined men. She had never met someone as refined, gentlemanly, and knowledgeable as Yan Lie. When they talked, she felt that every word, every sentence that he spoke were highly intelligent and thought-provoking; she could not but secretly look at him in wonder. However, they kept on heading north and getting further and further away from Lin'An; not only that, he never once mentioned revenge or even bring up the subject of a proper burial for her husband. Finally, she could not keep it in anymore and asked: "Mr. Yan, what are your plans regarding my husband's body?"

Yan Lie replied: "It's not that I don't want to search for your husband's body and give him a proper burial; but I killed government officials when I rescued Madame. Right now it is very dangerous for me there. As soon as I show myself around Lin'An, I would no doubt be killed by the soldiers. Besides, right now the soldiers are all over the place looking for Madame. After all, your

husband did commit treason by killing officials, this is a huge crime. If his relatives are captured, the men will be executed and women made into prostitutes for the soldiers. Dying for me is no big thing, but if nobody was around to protect Madame and the soldiers catch you, I could not bear to think of the consequences. Even in the underworld, I would be saddened beyond my own imaginings.” Seeing how honest and sincere he looked and sounded, Bao XiRuo nodded. Yan Lie continued: “I have thought this over thoroughly; the most important thing right now is to give your husband a proper burial. So we are going to JiaXing so I can obtain some money and get someone to take care of it in Lin’An. If Madame has to do it herself, then let me settle you down in JiaXing and take the risk by myself.”

Bao XiRuo felt she was expecting a bit too much for him to take such a big risk for her and replied: “If you can find someone reliable to take care of the whole matter, then that would be for the best.” She continued: “My husband had a sworn brother with the surname of Guo; he died with my husband. I am sorry to trouble you by asking you to try to give him a proper burial as well. I... I...” She started crying.

Yan Lie replied: “It’s no trouble at all, just leave it all to me. As for revenge, that bastard Duan TianDe is a government official; killing him is not so easy. Besides, he will be extra careful right now, all we can do is wait patiently for our chance.” Bao XiRuo wanted to kill Duan TianDe to avenge her husband and then follow him into the underworld. Even though Yan Lie’s every word seemed true, she didn’t know how long she would have to wait for this to happen. In a moment of impatience, she started to sob loudly. In between sobs, she replied: “I really don’t know about revenge. Even a hero like my husband could not defeat him. I... I’m just a weak woman, what... what can I do? Just let me die and join my husband and that’ll be that.”

Feeling that the situation was truly difficult, Yan Lie thought for a long while before finally saying: “Madame, do you trust me?” Bao XiRuo nodded. Yan Lie continued: “The only thing we can do now is to head up north to avoid the soldiers. The Song officials can’t chase us if we are in the north. As soon as we cross the YangTze, we should be out of danger. We’ll wait until things have cooled down before returning south and avenging your husband. Madame, please be rest assured that I will take care of this whole matter of justice for your husband.”

Bao XiRuo hesitated: “I am homeless without any relatives in the world, if I don’t follow him, where can a woman like me settle down in this world? The faces of the soldiers that night were beastly; if I had fallen into their hands, I would have definitely suffered a fate worse than death itself. Yet this man is not a friend or a relative, should a widow like me be traveling together with a young man like him? If I tried to kill myself right now, he would without a

doubt stop me.” She felt lost; the only thing she was sure of is that the future will be difficult. Thinking forward and looking back like this, she felt as if her insides were being twisted. For several days straight she had shed tears and now it seemed as if she had ran out of tears to shed.

Yan Lie spoke up: “If Madame feels that any part of my plan is bad, then please tell me. There is nothing I wouldn’t do for you.” Seeing how accommodating he is, Bao XiRuo actually felt a little bad about hesitating. Other than committing suicide, she really could not find another way out. Having no other choice, she lowered her head and replied: “Why don’t you take care of it.”

Yan Lie could not be happier: “I will forever be grateful that Madame saved my life. Madame...” Bao XiRuo interrupted him: “You don’t have to mention that matter ever again.” Yan Lie replied: “Yes, yes of course.”

That night, the two of them stopped at an inn in the town of XiaShi, still only getting one room. Ever since Bao XiRuo agreed to go up north with him, Yan Lie’s actions have not been as gentlemanly and proper as before. Once in a while his excitement would get out of hand. Bao XiRuo felt an indistinct notion that something might not be appropriate. But seeing that he had not shown even the slightest trace of getting any ideas, she figured that he must be a little too excited about being able to fully show his gratitude.

The two of them reached JiaXing at noon the next day. JiaXing is a big city in the western parts of ZheJiang. Since this was the place where many trade routes came together, it had always been a very prosperous place. When the Song Dynasty moved south, JiaXing had also become much closer to the capital, thus becoming even more prosperous and bustling.

Yan Lie suggested: “Let’s find an inn and rest up for a bit.” Bao XiRuo was worried about soldiers finding them and said: “It’s still early; we can still cover some ground.” Yan Lie replied: “The stores here aren’t half bad. Madame’s clothing is old and worn; we’ll have to buy some new ones.” This surprised Bao XiRuo as she took a moment to recover and replied: “Didn’t you just buy this yesterday? How is it already old and worn?” Yan Lie answered: “There was a lot of dust on the way, after wearing the same clothing for a couple of days it is no longer colorful anymore. Besides, as beautiful as Madame is, how can Madame possibly not wear the best clothing in the world?”

Hearing him praising her beauty, Bao XiRuo was secretly happy inside, but she lowered her head and said: “I am in the middle of paying my respects...” Yan Lie immediately cut her off: “Yes, of course. I understand.” Bao XiRuo did not say anything more. Her husband had never praised her beauty to her face like this before; she peeked over at Yan Lie and saw only sincerity on his face. At

once her heart shook, but she couldn't figure out if it was from happiness or sadness.

In JiaXing, Yan Lie asked about accommodations and was directed to the biggest inn, the 'Elegant Waters Inn'. After washing up, Yan Lie and Bao XiRuo ate some snacks together, sitting across from each other. Bao XiRuo wanted to ask him for a separate room but didn't know how to word it. Her face changed color several times for this was a heavy burden on her heart. After a bit, Yan Lie spoke up: "Madame, please make yourself at home. I'm going out to buy some things and am coming right back afterwards." Bao XiRuo nodded: "Please don't spend too much money." Yan Lie smiled and replied: "Pity that Madame is wearing mourning apparel and can't wear any jewelry. Even if I want to spend too much I can't."

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<sup>i</sup> Modern day KaiFeng, capital of North Song.

<sup>ii</sup> The year of Jing Kang translates to 1127 CE

<sup>iii</sup> The Eight Diagram is made of eight combinations of three whole or broken lines used in religious, mostly Taoist, ceremonies. The eight combinations usually surround a yin-yang symbol. The flag of South Korea is very similar except it has only four of the eight diagrams.

<sup>iv</sup> Those familiar with Heroes of the Water Margins should remember two characters that used halberds that are always together: Lu Meng and Guo Sheng. The nickname of Lu Meng was "Little Vassal" while Guo Sheng's was "Benevolent Aristocrat". They joined the rebellion at the same time and were always deployed in battle in pairs. The two of them even died together, smashed by rocks while attacking a higher position during the effort to quell the Rebellion of Fang La, who is the head of the Ming Cult mentioned later on in this novel and in Heaven Sword and Dragon Saber.

<sup>v</sup> Red Green Plume is a style of ancient Chinese painting featuring birds and animals with emphasis on the colors of red and green, obviously. Thin Gold Form is a style of calligraphy.

<sup>vi</sup> Weiqi board game.

<sup>vii</sup> 1 zhang = 3.3 meters / approximately 11 feet.

<sup>viii</sup> Lightness kung fu or a form of Chinese martial arts that will allow the practitioner the ability to jump higher many times that of the human body and further or the ability to run faster than an average person with a flitting continuous motion.

<sup>ix</sup> The world of martial art.

<sup>x</sup> 1 kg / 2.2 lbs.

<sup>xi</sup> Actually Han TuoZhou is not as bad as portrayed in the book. Between Yue Fei's execution in 1142 CE and Han TuoZhou's ascension as head chancellor in 1206 CE, the Southern Song emperors did not once invade the Jin territories in an attempt to reclaim some lands. Only after Han TuoZhou became chancellor was another attempt made. However, this attempt was poorly planned and general preparations were lacking. On top of that add the internal conflicts within the imperial court, and it is no surprise that it failed. Ning Zong, the emperor at the time, and a bunch of officials favoring peace executed Han TuoZhou and presented his head to the Jin emperor as a show of their willingness for peace. This was the last attempt by

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the Southern Song Dynasty to drive out the Jin. So Han TuoZhou was actually a patriot who died for his country instead of how he is portrayed in this book.