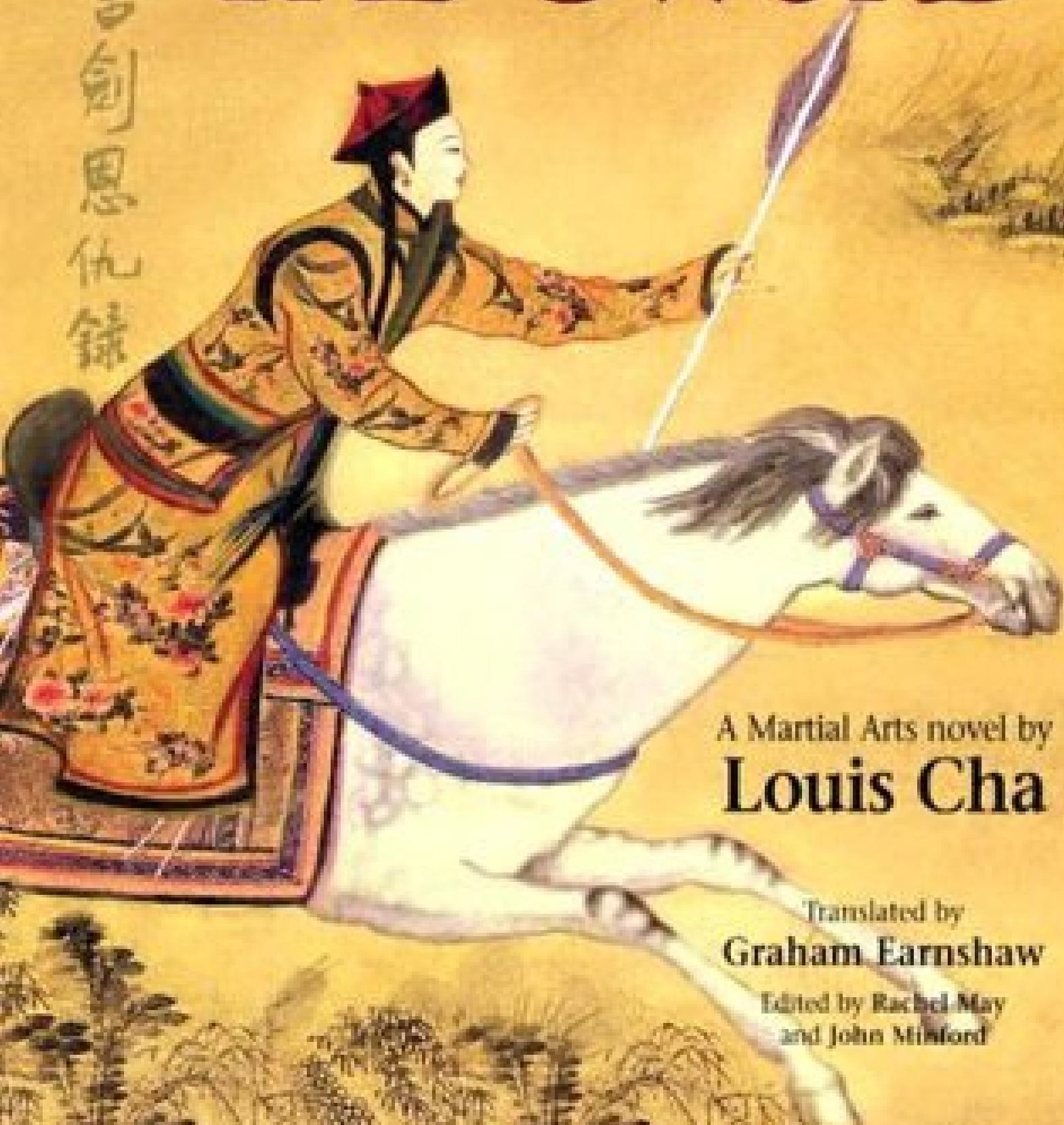


THE BOOK & THE SWORD

書劍恩仇錄



A Martial Arts novel by
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Translated by
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Introduction by the Translator

Jin Yong is the biggest-selling author by far in the world of Chinese novels. During the 1960s and 1970s, he wrote a series of kung-fu epics which transcend anything attempted before in Chinese literature, and they are still monster sellers. They find favour with all

levels of society from the university professors who savour his command of the Chinese language, to kids who just love the fight scenes.

They have since been re-published in a number of Asian languages, including

Japanese and Vietnamese, and published, in many pirated and official Chinese versions, in Taiwan and on the Chinese mainland. They have all been filmed

several times for television and on the cinema, and many of the characters Jin Yong created have become a part of life for Chinese people, in much the way that Dickens' *Oliver Twist* was a part of the lives of Victorian readers.

The Book and Sword was the first novel Jin Yong wrote. The story has a

panoramic sweep which takes as its base a few unbeatable themes - secret societies, king fu masters, the sensational rumour so dear to Chinese hearts that the great Manchu emperor Qian Long was in fact a Chinese and not Manchu.

It mixes in the exotic flavours of central Asia, a lost city in the desert guarded by wolf packs and the *Fragrant Princess*. This lady is an embellishment of an historical figure, although whether she actually smelled of flowers, we will never know.

I hope you enjoy the translation. I was as faithful to the spirit of the

original as I could be, but took the view that it was necessary to simplify some elements of the story and the writing in order to make it more acceptable to an English-reading audience. Mr Jin Yong agreed with my approach. As a

result, there are some differences between the original and my translation, but they are differences only of omission. In other words, I have added nothing.

Graham Earnshaw

Chapter 1

It was a hot summer's day in June, 1754, the eighteenth year of the reign of Emperor Qian Long. In the inner courtyard of the military commander's Yamen in Fufeng in Shaanxi province, a fourteen-year-old girl skipped towards her teacher's study, eager for a history lesson. All was peaceful: not even a thread of cool wind stirred. The girl hesitated, afraid that her teacher had not yet woken from his afternoon nap. Quietly, she circled round to the window, pierced a hole in its paper covering with one of her golden hair clips, and peeped inside.

She saw her teacher sitting cross-legged on a chair, smiling. His right hand waved slightly in the air, and there was a faint clicking sound. Glancing over to where the sound came from, she noticed several dozen flies on a wooden partition opposite, all as still as could be. Puzzled, she looked more closely and noticed a golden needle as slender as a hair protruding from the back of each fly. The needles were so small that she was only able to see them because they reflected the rays of the late afternoon sun slanting in through the windows.

Flies were still buzzing to and fro around the room. The teacher waved his hand again, there was a small noise, and another fly was pinned to the partition. Absolutely fascinated, she ran to the door and burst in, shouting: "Teacher! Show me how to do that."

The girl was Li Yuanzhi, the only child of the local military commander, Li Keshou. Her fresh, beautiful face was flushed with excitement.

"Hmm," said her teacher, a scholar in his mid-fifties named Lu. "Why aren't you playing with your friends? You want to hear some more stories, do you?"

Moving a chair over to the partition, she jumped up to look, then pulled the needles out of the flies one by one, wiped them clean on a piece of paper and handed them back to him. "That was a brilliant piece of kung fu, teacher," she said. "You have to show me how to do it."

Lu smiled. "If you want to learn kung fu, there's no-one better at it within a

hundred miles of here than your own father," he said.

"My father knows how to shoot an eagle with an arrow, but he can't kill a fly with a needle. If you don't believe me, I'll go and ask him."

Lu thought for a moment, and then nodded. "All right, come tomorrow morning and I'll teach you. Now go off and play. And you're not allowed to tell anyone about me killing the flies. If anyone finds out, I won't teach you."

Yuanzhi was overjoyed. She knelt before him and kowtowed eight times. Lu accepted the gesture with a smile. "You pick things up very quickly. It is fitting that I should teach you this kind of kung fu. However ..." He stopped, deep in thought.

"Teacher," said Yuanzhi hurriedly. "I will do anything you say."

Yuanzhi was overjoyed. She knelt before him and kowtowed eight times. Lu accepted the gesture with a smile. "You pick things up very quickly. It is fitting that I should teach you this kind of kung fu. However ..." He stopped, deep in thought. "Teacher," said Yuanzhi hurriedly. "I will do anything you say."

"I would not dare defy your orders," she said.

"If you ever use the skills I teach you to do evil, I will take your life as easily as turning my hand over."

His face and voice became stern and hard, and for a moment Yuanzhi was frightened. But then she smiled. "I'll be good," she said. "Anyway, how could you bear to kill me?"

The Wudang kung fu sect to which Lu belonged, one of the most famous, stressed the use of Internal Force Kung Fu. In his prime, Lu had roamed China fighting for justice, and had become a famous member of the Dragon Slayer's

Society, a secret anti-Manchu organisation whose power and influence had been widespread during the reign of Yong Zheng, the former Emperor. But the society had been rigorously suppressed, and by the seventh or eighth year of Emperor Qian Long's reign, it had disintegrated. Lu fled to the border areas of China. The Manchu court dispatched men to look for him, but he was quick-witted and a good fighter and managed to avoid capture. Working on the principle that 'small crooks hide in the wilderness, middling crooks in the city and big crooks in officialdom', Lu eventually made his way to Commander Li's household and set himself up as a teacher.

From that day, Lu began teaching Yuanzhi the basic techniques of the Wudang school's kung fu style, known as Limitless Occult Kung Fu. He taught her control of her emotions and thoughts, the ten Tapestries and the thirty-two Long-arm Blows. He trained her to use her eyes and ears, and showed her the use of hand darts and other hidden projectiles.

More than two years passed. Yuanzhi, hard-working and clever, made fast progress. Her father, Commander Li, was transferred to Gansu province as military commander at Anxi, one of the major towns in the northwest border regions, bordering on the great desert of central Asia. His family, including Lu, went with him.

Another two years passed as Lu taught Yuanzhi the Soft Cloud sword technique and the secret of the Golden Needles. She did as her teacher had ordered, and did not tell a soul that she was learning kung fu. Every day she practised by herself in the rear flower garden. When the young mistress was practising her kung fu, the maids did not understand what they saw, and the menservants did not dare to watch too closely.

Commander Li was a capable man, and he advanced steadily through the ranks of officialdom. In 1759, the twenty-third year of the Emperor Qian Long's reign, he distinguished himself in the battle of Ili, in which the largest of the tribes in the Muslim areas was defeated, and received an Imperial decree promoting him to the post of Commander-in-Chief of Zhejiang Province in the southeast.

Yuanzhi had been born and raised in the border areas of the northwest, and the prospect of travelling to new and beautiful lands filled her with excitement.

She pressed her teacher to come as well, and Lu, who had been away from the central areas for a long time, agreed with pleasure.

Li Keshou went ahead with a small escort to take up his post and left his chief-of-staff and 20 soldiers in charge of his family who were to follow him. The officer's name was Deng, a vigorous and energetic man in his forties who sported a small moustache.

The entourage consisted of more than a dozen mules and a few horses. Madame Li sat in a mule-drawn carriage, but Yuanzhi couldn't bear to be cooped up and insisted on riding. Since it would have been improper for the daughter of a high official to be seen riding in public, she changed into boy's clothes which made her look so extraordinarily handsome that she refused to change back into her normal attire no matter what anyone said. All Madame Li could do was sigh and let her daughter do as she pleased.

It was a deep autumn day. Lu rode far behind the group looking at the passing scenery as the colours of late afternoon merged into evening. But there was little to see around the ancient road except yellow sand, withered grasses and the occasional crow flying homewards. A breeze sprang up from the west and Lu began to recite:

"His body and name scarred by a hundred battles
The general approaches a bridge across a river
And turns to look back 10,000 miles
At the dead men left behind.
Cold are the waters of the River Yi
And the whistling west wind,
Full of cloaks and crowns like snow.
The hero's song of lament has not yet ended....."

"The poet Xin Jiaxuan could have been writing of my own feelings," he thought. "He was much like me when he wrote it, watching China fall to the barbarian tribes, with no way of knowing when the old days would return. No wonder he sang such a sad song."

The entourage crossed the summit of a hill. Looking at the darkening sky, the mulemen said that another three miles would bring them to Twin Pagodas, a

large town, where they planned to spend the night.

Just then, Lu heard the sound of galloping hooves and saw far in front two magnificent chestnut horses racing towards them through a cloud of dust. The two riders flashed by, one on either side of the line of mules, and were gone. Lu slapped his horse and caught up with Yuanzhi.

"Did you get a good look at those two?" he asked in a low voice.

"Were they bandits?" she replied excitedly. She would have liked nothing better than for them to be outlaws bent on robbery, giving her a chance to display the skills she had worked so hard to attain over the past five years.

"It's hard to say," said Lu. "But judging by their ability in the martial arts, they wouldn't be ordinary highwaymen."

"Are they kung fu masters?"

"From the way they ride their horses, I'd say it's unlikely they are novices."

As the entourage neared the town, two more horsemen galloped past.

"Hmm, this is very strange," mused Lu. The country was desolate and the evening mist was thickening. He wondered why anyone would set out on a journey at this time of day.

Not long after, the muletrain entered the town. Officer Deng led them to a large inn and Yuanzhi and her mother were shown to one of the best rooms. Lu was given a smaller room, and after he had eaten dinner, a servant lit the lantern. All was quiet, and he was about to go to sleep when a dog barked. From far away he heard the faint sound of galloping horses approaching and he thought again about the four riders they had passed on the road.

The clip-clop of horses' hooves came closer and stopped right in front of the inn. There was a knock on the front door and Lu heard a servant open it and say: "You've been riding hard. There's food and drink prepared for you."

"Go and feed the horses quickly," said a rough voice. "We must start out again as soon as we've finished eating."

Lu considered the situation. Groups of men hurrying northwest, and judging by the way they rode, all of them experts in the martial arts. In all his years in

the border areas, he had never seen the like of it. He slipped quietly out of his room, crossed the courtyard and went round to the back of the inn.

"All right, you say the Young Helmsman is very young," he heard the rough-voiced man say. "Do you think he will be able to control all the brothers?"

Lu followed the voice and stationed himself underneath the window.

"He'll have to," he heard the other say. "It was the old master's wish whether the Young Helmsman likes it or not."

The man had a deep, sonorous voice, and Lu could tell his Internal Strength was profound. Not daring to make a hole in the window paper to peep through, he continued to listen from where he was, breathing as lightly as he could.

"Of course," the rough-throated one replied. "But we don't know if the Young Helmsman will be willing to do it."

"You don't have to worry about that," said the other. "He'll follow the old master's wishes."

He said the word 'follow' with a peculiar southern Chinese accent, and Lu's heart jumped. "Where have I heard that voice before?" he thought. He sifted through his mind, and finally remembered that it belonged to his old friend Zhao Banshan, whom he had known 20 years before in the Dragon Slayers' Society. Zhao was about 10 years younger than he, but the two had often trained together, and had a great respect for each other. Lu had heard no news of him since the Dragon Slayers' Society had broken up and he was delighted at chancing upon an old friend in such an unlikely place. As he was about to call out to Zhao, the light in the room was suddenly doused and a dart shot out of the window.

But it was not aimed at Lu. A figure shifted in the shadows nearby and caught the dart, then stood up, about to challenge the dart thrower. Lu leapt over and whispered fiercely: "Don't make a sound! Come with me." It was Yuanzhi.

No one chased them. Lu pulled Yuanzhi into his room, and under the light saw an expression of such eagerness on her face that he was both angry and amused.

"Yuanzhi, do you know what sort of men they are? What were you doing trying to pick a fight with them?" he asked sternly.

"What were they doing shooting a dart at me?" she replied defiantly.

"If they aren't outlaws, then they are secret society men," he said. "One of them I know, and his kung fu would not be weaker than mine. Travelling through the night as they are, they must be on very urgent business. That dart was not meant to injure you, it was just telling you not to be nosy. If he had really wanted to hit you, I doubt if you would have been able to catch it. Now go and sleep."

They heard a door open and the sound of horses' hooves as the two men galloped away.

The next morning, the muletrain started out again, and travelled ten miles in just over two hours.

"Look, teacher," said Yuanzhi. "There's someone coming."

Two chestnut horses galloped towards them, and because of the previous night's incident, they paid particular attention to the riders. The horses, fine and spirited, were identical. Even stranger, the two riders were also identical. Both were aged about 40, tall and thin with faces as yellow as wax, sunken eyes and long slanting eyebrows: the effect was frightening.

As they passed by, the two men glanced at Yuanzhi with their strange eyes. She reined in her horse and stared back belligerently, but they took no notice and raced on westwards.

"Where did that pair of ghosts come from, I wonder," she said.

Lu glanced back at the receding figures. "Aha, it must be them," he cried.

"You recognise them?" she asked excitedly.

"They must be the Twin Knights of Sichuan. Their surname is Chang, but everyone calls them Black Death and White Death."

Yuanzhi laughed. "They've got good nicknames. They look like a couple of skeletons."

"Little girls shouldn't make jokes about other people," said Lu. "They may be ugly but they are skilled fighters. I've never met them, but from what I've heard, they travel the country fighting evil and doing justice. They are widely known as

outlaws, but they steal only from the rich and help the poor. They have made a great name for themselves."

"But if they are identical, why are they called Black and White?"

"From what I've been told, the only difference between them is that one has a black mole in the corner of his eye, and the other doesn't. There's probably no one better at Black Sand Palm Kung Fu than those two."

"What are they doing in the border areas?" Yuanzhi asked.

"I have no idea," Lu replied. "I've never heard of them operating out here before."

As he spoke, they heard more horses coming towards them. This time, the riders were a Taoist priest and a hunchback dressed in brightly-coloured clothes. The priest had a longsword slung across his back. His face was pale and sickly and he had only one arm: his left sleeve was tucked under his belt.

Seeing the hunchback's ugly face and his garish attire, Yuanzhi laughed. "Teacher," she shouted before Lu could stop her, "Look at the hunchback!"

The hunchback glared at her angrily and as he passed, stretched out his hand to grab hold of her. The priest seemed to have guessed what he would do, and stopped the hunchback's hand with a flick of his horse whip. "Tenth Brother," he growled, "Don't make trouble."

Lu and Yuanzhi looked back and saw the two horses breaking into a gallop. Suddenly, the hunchback did a reverse somersault off the back of his horse, and with three steps covered the distance to Yuanzhi. Yuanzhi's sword was in her hand, but the hunchback did not attack her. He grabbed the tail of her horse, and the animal, which was galloping along, reared back on its hind legs with a loud scream. The hunchback's strength was frightening: the horse had not pulled him forward an inch. He chopped at the horse's tautly-stretched tail with his right hand, and snapped off the end as if with a knife. The horse lunged forward, and Yuanzhi was almost thrown. The hunchback turned and ran off swiftly. In a second, he caught up with his horse, still galloping westwards, leapt onto its back and soon disappeared from view.

"Teacher!" Yuanzhi called out in a plaintive voice. Lu frowned and was about

to berate her. But seeing her eyes glistening with tears, he stopped himself.

Later, they heard a shout from behind: "Weiyang ... Weiyang."

Yuanzhi was mystified. "What's that?" she asked.

"It's the call of a bodyguard agency shouter," he said. "The agencies hire out bodyguards or escort goods and people, especially on long journeys. Every bodyguard agency has a different call, and they use it to let both outlaws and friends know who they are. The bodyguard agency business is based seven parts on goodwill and three parts on fighting ability. If the head of an agency is generous and creates a lot of goodwill, he will gain many friends, and his business will prosper. Outlaws will hear the call and let them pass without attacking. 'Being friends is better than being enemies,' as the saying goes. Now, if you were to try the bodyguard agency business...ha! With all the people you have annoyed in less than half a day, you would have trouble travelling an inch, even if you were ten times the fighter you are now."

"Which bodyguard agency's call is that?" she asked, ignoring his teasing.

"The Zhen Yuan Agency from Beijing, probably the biggest in north China. The head of the agency is 'North China Earth Shaker' Wang Weiyang. He must be seventy by now, but they're still calling 'Weiyang', so he hasn't retired yet. Ah, perhaps he ought to. The Zhen Yuan Agency has been making big profits for 40 years now. That should be enough for anyone."

"Have you ever met him?" Yuanzhi asked.

"I've met him. He uses an Eight Diagram sword and the Eight Diagram boxing technique. In the old days, there was no one in north China who could beat him."

Yuanzhi was elated. "They're travelling very fast. When they catch up to us, you can point the old hero out to me."

"Now why would he come out himself?" Lu said. "You really are a silly girl!"

Yuanzhi sulked. She was always being told off by her teacher. It wasn't fair. She spurred her horse forward and caught up with the carriage, planning to talk to her mother for a while to relieve the frustration. Glancing round, she saw the stub of her horse's tail and shuddered. There was nothing unusual about

breaking a spear with one blow, but a horse's tail was pliable. How had the hunchback managed to snap it? She reined in her horse, meaning to wait for Lu to catch up so she could ask him, but changed her mind and galloped up the line to Officer Deng instead.

"Officer Deng," she said, pouting. "My horse's tail looks very ugly."

"I don't know what to do with this horse of mine," Deng replied, guessing her meaning. "He's in a bad mood today and won't do anything I say. You are a good horsewoman, mistress. Perhaps you could help me break him in."

"I probably won't be able to handle him either," she said modestly. The two exchanged horses. Deng's horse was of course very docile.

"Very good, mistress," he complimented her. "Even horses do your bidding."

The bodyguard agency's call came closer and closer, and before long, a muletrain consisting of a score or more heavily laden animals began to pass.

Lu was afraid one of the agency men would recognise him, so he covered the top part of his face with a large fur cap. As the lead escorts trotted past, he heard one of them remark: "According to Brother Han, Brother Jiao Wenqi's body has been found."

Lu's heart missed a beat as he heard the name. Jiao was one of the Six Devils of Guandong and a formidable fighter. Five years before while on an errand to the Muslim regions, Jiao had discovered Lu was hiding in Commander Li's household and had come at the dead of night with two other fighters with the aim of capturing Lu and taking him back to Beijing to claim the reward on his head. After a hard fight, Lu had killed all three and hidden their corpses on a deserted hillside.

Lu looked round at the escort who had spoken, but had time to see only that he had a full beard and a face as black as thunder. Once he had passed, Lu saw he was carrying on his back a red knapsack and a pair of Five Element Wheels, steel rings covered in knives.

"Could it be that the Guandong Devils have become bodyguard agency escorts?" he wondered. Of the six Devils, Lu had only ever seen Jiao, but he knew that the rest were excellent fighters, and that two of them, the Yan

brothers, used Five Element Wheels.

Lu thought about the number of top fighters they had met in the past two days and wondered if it had anything to do with himself. From the look of things, the Zhen Yuan Agency men were actually on an escort assignment, so they posed no threat. As to the fighters travelling westwards in pairs, they did not seem to be looking for him. But where were they going and why?

Having exchanged mounts with Officer Deng, Yuanzhi reined in her horse to wait for Lu to pass.

"Teacher," she smiled. "How come no more riders have passed us? I want to see a few more of these heroes."

Her words jogged Lu's mind and he slapped his thigh. "Ah, you old fool," he rebuked himself. "Why didn't you think of the 'Greeting The Dragon's Head Ceremony'?"

"What's that?" she asked.

"It is the most solemn of the ceremonies held by the secret societies to honour an important personage. Usually, the six most senior men in the society are chosen to go to greet the guest, but for really important meetings, twelve are chosen and they go in pairs. Five pairs have passed us now, so there must be still be one pair in front of us."

"Which secret society do they belong to?" Yuanzhi asked.

"That I don't know. But if the Twin Knights of Sichuan and that hunchback are members, the society's power and influence must be tremendous. Whatever you do, don't provoke anyone else, do you hear?"

Yuanzhi nodded, and waited expectantly to see who else would pass them by.

Midday came and went, but there was no sign of anyone on the road in front. Lu was surprised and wondered if he could have guessed wrongly. Finally, instead of riders approaching from in front, they gradually became aware of the sound of camel bells from behind, and saw a dust cloud rising as a large desert caravan hurried towards them.

The caravan consisted of dozens of camels with 20 or 30 horses squeezed in

between them, all ridden by Muslims with high noses and sunken eyes. They had thick beards on their faces and white cloths tied around their heads. Scimitars hung from their waists. Muslim traders were a common sight on the road to the central areas and Lu did not consider it unusual. Amidst the group, he noticed a graceful young girl, dazzlingly beautiful, dressed in yellow robes and riding a black horse.

Lu was impressed, but did no more than glance at her. Yuanzhi, however, stared in open-mouthed wonder. Growing up in the northwest border areas, she had seen few well-groomed girls, let alone girls as beautiful as this one. She was about the same age as Yuanzhi, 18 or 19, with a dagger at her waist and long braids hanging down over her shoulders. She wore a full-length yellow gown, leather boots and a small hat embroidered with gold silk, on the side of which was fastened a turquoise feather. She was an enchanting sight.

As the girl trotted by, Yuanzhi spurred on her horse and followed, gazing fixedly at her. The girl was annoyed at being stared at disrespectfully by a Chinese boy, and she whirled her whip above her head and wrapped it round the mane of Yuanzhi's horse. Giving it a sharp tug, she pulled out a large clump of hair, and the horse reared in pain, almost throwing Yuanzhi to the ground. The Muslim girl cracked the whip in the air and horse hair flew in all directions.

In a fit of pique, Yuanzhi pulled out a steel dart and threw it at the girl's back. But, not wishing to harm her, she also called out: "Watch out for the dart!" The girl leant to one side, and the dart shot past her right shoulder. She waited until it was about ten feet beyond her, then flicked her whip, caught the dart by its tip and smoothly sent it flying back towards Yuanzhi, calling out: "Hey, little boy! Here's your dart!" Yuanzhi caught it neatly.

The Muslims in the caravan applauded loudly at the superb skill with which the yellow-robed girl handled her whip. A tall, thick-set man with a heavy black beard went over and said a few words to her, to which she replied: "Oh, father!" But she took no further notice of Yuanzhi. The dozens of camels and horses moved on and gradually disappeared.

"That girl was impressive, wasn't she?" said Lu.

"These Muslims ride day and night. They ought to be good with their whips.

But it doesn't mean she knows any real kung fu," Yuanzhi replied.

Lu laughed. "Really?" he asked.

Towards evening they arrived in the town of Bulongji. There was only one large inn in the town, outside of which was planted the flag of the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency. With two large groups to look after, the inn's servants were very busy.

Lu had a wash, and then strolled into the courtyard of the inn with a cup of tea in his hand. In the dining hall, he saw two tables full of agency men drinking and talking loudly. The lead escort with the Five Element Wheels had put the weapons down but kept the red knapsack on his back.

Taking a sip of tea, Lu gazed up at the sky.

One of the lead escorts laughed. "Brother Yan, once you've delivered this toy to Beijing, General Zhao will reward you with at least a thousand, won't he? You can go and have a good time with that girlfriend of yours, Xibao."

So it really is one of the Yan brothers, Lu thought, and paid even closer attention to what was said.

"A reward?" said Yan. "Ha! Well, everyone will get something."

"Your Xibao has probably gone off with some other man willing to make an honest woman of her," added an effeminate voice. Lu looked over out of the corner of his eye, and saw a man with a sly face and a slight figure, also dressed as a lead escort.

Yan grunted, obviously not pleased.

"You bastard, Tong," added the first lead escort. "You never have anything good to say."

Tong laughed. "All right," he said. "But Brother Yan, fun is fun and serious is serious. Don't think about Xibao too much or you might find someone has stolen that red knapsack off your back. It's not important if lose your head or not, but the agency's reputation has to be maintained."

"Don't worry," Yan replied angrily. "If those Muslims try stealing it back, I'll soon put an end to their nonsense. I am one of the Six Guandong Devils and I

got where I am with real kung fu, not like some of the weaklings in the bodyguard agencies these days who can do nothing but eat and fart!"

Lu looked at the red knapsack on Yan's back: it wasn't big, and from the look of it, whatever was inside was very light.

"It's true that the Six Devils of Guandong are famous," Tong said. "It's a pity that Brother Jiao was done in. We don't even know who the murderer was."

Yan banged the table. "Who says we don't know? It has to be the Red Flower Society!"

That's strange, Lu thought, I killed Jiao. What is this Red Flower Society? He walked slowly around the courtyard inspecting the flowers, moving closer to the group of lead escorts.

Tong would not let the matter drop. "It's a pity," he said. "If I wasn't such a weakling, I would have settled things with the Red Flower Society long ago."

Yan shook with anger. One of the other lead escorts broke in to mediate: "Anyway, the Red Flower Society's leader died last month," he said. "They've lost their man in command, so who is there to settle with? And another thing, where is the proof that Jiao was murdered by the Red Flower Society? When you find them and they deny the charge, what are you going to do?"

"Yes," said Tong changing his tack. "We daren't provoke them, but surely we've got enough guts to bully a few Muslims. This little toy we've snatched is as precious to them as life itself. In the future, if General Zhao ever wants money from them, or cattle and sheep, do you think they'd dare to refuse? I tell you Yan, stop thinking about that little Xibao of yours. When we get back to Beijing, you should ask General Zhao to give you a little Muslim girl to be your mistress. Then you can really..."

Before he could finish, a piece of mud brick flew out of nowhere and lodged itself in his mouth. Two of the other lead escorts snatched up their weapons and rushed outside while Yan picked up his Five Element Wheels and looked warily around. His younger brother came running in, and both stood together, not daring to move for fear of falling into some trap. Tong spat out the piece of mud and began swearing.

The two other lead escorts, Tai and Qian, rushed in through the door. "The little bastard's gone," one of them said. "There's no sign of him."

Lu had observed the whole incident and laughed inwardly at the helpless expression on Tong's face. Then he saw a shadow darting across the rafters in a corner of the dining hall, and went slowly outside. It was already growing dark, but he spotted a figure leap off the corner of the roof, land noiselessly, and speed off eastwards.

Lu wanted to know who had treated Tong to a mouthful of mud and, making use of Lightness Kung Fu (a type of kung fu that makes extra-fast running and super-human leaps possible.), he followed, the teacup still in his hand. The pace was fast, but the person he was following was not aware of his presence.

Lu's quarry had a slim figure and moved daintily, almost like a girl. They crossed a hill and an ink-black forest loomed ahead. The person ahead slipped into the trees with Lu close behind. Underneath, the ground was covered with dead leaves and twigs which crackled as he stepped on them. Afraid of giving himself away, he slowed down. Just then, the moon broke through the clouds and a shaft of clear light shone down through the branches, covering the earth with jumbled ghostly shadows. In the distance he saw the flash of a yellow gown, and his quarry moved out of the forest.

He followed to the edge of the trees. Beyond was a large expanse of grass on which were pitched eight or nine tents. His curiosity got the better of him, and he decided to go and have a look. He waited until two guards had turned away, then jumped across with a 'Swallow Gliding Over Water' leap and landed among the tents. Crouching low, he ran to the back of the largest tent, pitched in the centre. Inside, he could hear people talking agitatedly in the Muslim language. He had lived in the border areas for many years, and understood some of what was said. Carefully, he lifted up the corner of the canvas and looked inside.

The tent was lit by two oil lamps under which a large number of people were seated on carpets. He recognised them as the Muslim caravan that had passed them that day. The yellow-robed girl stood up and drew a dagger from her waist. She cut the index finger of her left hand with the tip of the blade and let several drops of blood fall into a cup of horse's milk wine. Then one-by-one, every Muslim in the tent did likewise. The tall Muslim that the girl had called

father raised the wine cup and made a short speech of which Lu could only understand something about 'The Koran' and 'Our Homeland'. The yellow-robed girl spoke after him, her voice crisp and clear, and concluded by saying:

"If the sacred Koran is not recovered, I swear never to return to our homeland." The Muslims lustily repeated the oath. In the dim light, Lu could see determination and anger on every face.

The group belonged to one of the richest and most powerful of the nomadic Muslim tribes of the Tianshan Mountains, numbering nearly 200,000 people. The tall man was Muzhuolun, the leader of the tribe; a strong fighter, fair and just, he was greatly loved by his people. The yellow-robed girl was his daughter, Huo Qingtong.

The tribe lived by nomadic herding and contentedly travelled the great desert. But as the power of the Manchu court extended into the Muslim areas, its demands for taxes increased. At first, Muzhuolun went out of his way to comply, and worked hard to meet the demands. But the Manchu officials were insatiable and made life impossible for the tribe. On several occasions, Muzhuolun sent missions to the Manchu court to appeal for a reduction of taxes. But far from achieving a reduction, the missions only served to arouse the Court's suspicions. General Zhao Wei was given an Imperial order to supervise military affairs in the Muslim areas and he discovered that the tribe owned an ancient hand-written Koran, originally brought from the sacred city of Mecca, which they had treasured for generations. The General decided to get the Koran to use to blackmail the Muslims into submission and he dispatched a number of top fighters who stole it while Muzhuolun was out on a long journey. The Muslims had organised a group to recover the Sacred Book.

Lu decided that the Muslims' plotting had nothing to do with him, and he carefully stood up to return to the inn. At that instant, Huo Qingtong noticed him.

"There's someone outside," she whispered to her father and shot out of the tent in time to see a shadow running fast for the trees. With a wave of her hand, she sent a steel dart speeding after him.

Lu heard the projectile coming and leant slightly to one side. As it passed, he

stretched out the index finger of his right hand and, carefully calculating the speed and direction of the dart, tapped it gently as it passed so that it fell into the teacup he was holding. Then without looking back, he made use of his Lightness Kung Fu and almost flew back to the inn, where he went straight to his room. He took the dart out of the cup and saw it was made of pure steel with a feather attached to it. He threw it into his bag.

The bodyguard agency group started out first early the next day, the shouter shouting the agency's call. Lu noticed that most of the lead escorts were stationed around Yan. It seemed the red knapsack on his back was the real treasure being escorted.

Once the agency men had left, Officer Deng led his own column out onto the road. At noon, they rested briefly at a place called Yellow Crag after which the road sloped steadily upward into the mountains. They planned to cross three ranges that day before stopping in Sandaogou.

The mountain road became increasingly precarious and Yuanzhi and Officer Deng kept close by Madame Li's mule-drawn carriage, afraid that if an animal lost its footing, it could send the carriage crashing into the gorge below. Around mid-afternoon, they arrived at the mouth of Black Gold Gorge and saw the agency men seated on the ground resting. Officer Deng directed his men to follow suit. Black Gold Gorge was flanked by high peaks with an extremely steep mountain track leading up between them. Stopping on the track was difficult, so the top of the gorge had to be reached at one stretch. Lu hung back at the rear and turned his back, not wishing to exchange glances with the agency men.

Once rested, they entered the gorge, the bodyguard agency men and the soldiers under Officer Deng's command forming a long snaking column. Men and animals alike panted up the mountain. The shouts of the mulemen melded into a continuous drone. Suddenly, Lu saw a figure darting across the crest of a peak, and heard the jangling of camel bells from in front as a group of Muslims mounted on camels and horses charged down towards them from the top of the gorge. Their hooves sounded like thunder, and the agency men began shouting,

calling on them to slow down.

In an instant, the Muslim group was upon them and four camels quickly encircled Lead Escort Yan who was carrying the red knapsack. Each of the four Muslim riders raised a large iron hammer with both hands and smashed it down viciously on his head. The mountain road was narrow, leaving little room for manoeuvring, and the camel-men had the advantage of height. Even if he had been a better fighter, Yan would have been unable to avoid the four hammers, each weighing more than 100 pounds. Both he and his horse were beaten to a bloody pulp.

The yellow-robed Muslim girl, Huo Qingtong, jumped down from her horse and with a flash of her sword cut one of the straps holding the red knapsack to the corpse that had been Yan. But before she had time for a second stroke, she felt a gust of wind at her back as a blade sliced towards her. She dodged to one side and cut the other strap. Her assailant aimed a cutting stroke at her waist to stop her from picking up the knapsack. Unable to avoid the stroke, she raised her sword to block it, and the two blades clashed in a shower of sparks. Looking up, she saw it was the handsome young boy who had stared at her so disrespectfully the day before. In a sudden fit of anger, she lashed out with three attacking sword strokes, and the two began a fierce duel.

Her assailant was Yuanzhi, still dressed in boy's clothes. Without stopping to consider the rights and wrongs of the situation, she had decided to get her own back for the damage done to her horse's mane.

Huo Qingtong could see her chance of recovering the Koran slipping away and wanted to finish the fight quickly. She changed to the 'Three Part' sword style, and in a few strokes had forced Yuanzhi into retreat. The 'Three Part' sword style was the highest achievement of the Tianshan school of kung fu. It was called 'Three Part' because only a third of each stroke was completed. As the opponent moved to counter each one, the stroke changed. Intricate and vicious, the style included no defensive strokes: attacking and killing was all.

The two went through a dozen or more moves without their blades ever touching, Huo Qingtong completing only a third of each stroke, and then changing it without waiting for her opponent to defend. She cut and thrust at the air around Yuanzhi's body, and the Chinese girl, knowing she could not match

her opponent's speed, leapt away. Huo Qingtong did not pursue her but turned back to the knapsack, and found it was already in the hands of a small, thin man standing beside Yan's body. She lunged at him with her sword.

"Oh dear," the man cried. "Uncle Tong had better get back in place!" Lead Escort Tong jumped clear with three quick steps and Huo Qingtong followed hard on his heels. She raised her sword to cut him down, but the stroke was blocked by a Five Element Wheel thrust forward by the surviving Yan brother.

Huo Qingtong fought briefly with Yan, and recognised him as a strong and capable adversary. Then she heard a loud whistle coming from the hilltops, the signal for retreat, and knew that help for the agency men was on the way. She saw Tong scampering away with the knapsack and quickly changed to the Three Part sword style, forcing Yan to retreat, and then raced after him. The whistles became louder.

"Daughter! Retreat quickly!" Muzhuolun shouted. She abandoned the chase and directed her comrades as they lifted the Muslim dead and wounded onto camels and horses. Then the Muslim column charged on down the mountain path. But a little way further on, they found several dozen Manchu soldiers blocking their path.

Officer Deng rode forward, his spear held crosswise. "You insolent Muslims!" he shouted. "What is this insurrection?" Two of Huo Qingtong's steel darts hit his hands and the spear clattered to the ground. Muzhuolun raised his sabre high and charged forward with some other Muslim warriors, and the Manchu troops scattered. Boulders crashed down from the mountain tops, pulverising more than a dozen Manchu troops, and in the midst of the melee, the Muslims made good their escape.

Throughout the battle, Lu had remained on the sidelines, his hands folded inside his sleeves. Yuanzhi had been of great assistance to the agency men even though she had been beaten by Huo Qingtong, and the Muslims had been unable to get what they wanted. As the agency men tended the wounded and carried off the dead, Lu gave her a severe lecture, criticising her for interfering in the affairs of others, and needlessly making even more enemies.

"There are very few good men amongst the bodyguard agencies, and many

bad ones. Why bother helping people to do evil?" he scolded her. She hung her head, not daring to look up.

They crossed through the pass and arrived in Sandaogou, a medium-sized market town, as dusk was falling. The mulemen said there was only one inn, called the Antong, and both the agency men and Officer Deng's column headed for it. The inn was crude and simple in the extreme with earthen walls and mud floors. Seeing no servants coming out to greet them, Tong shouted: "Is everyone dead in there? I damn eighteen generations of your ancestors!" Yuanzhi frowned. No-one had ever dared to use such language within her hearing before.

Just then, they heard the sound of clashing swords from inside. Yuanzhi was delighted. "Here's some more fun to watch!" she cried and ran into the inn ahead of the others.

The entrance hall was empty and silent, but passing through to the courtyard, she saw a young woman fighting fiercely with four men. In her left hand was a sword, and in her right, a knife. She was obviously battling for her life. It seemed to Yuanzhi that the four men were trying to force their way into the room outside which the woman was standing. The four were all strong fighters: one wielded a whip, one a staff, one a sword and one a Devil's Head Knife.

Lu also entered the courtyard. "How is it that we are continually running into these secret society people?" he thought.

The woman dodged and parried, holding all four men at bay until suddenly the one wielding the Devil's Head Knife swung his weapon towards her as another of the attackers thrust his sword at her heart. She fended off the sword with the knife in her right hand, but she could not dodge the Devil's Head Knife and it struck her on the left shoulder. But she did not give up, and as she continued to fight, drops of blood flew in all directions.

"Don't kill her! We need her alive," shouted the man with the whip.

Lu's chivalrous heart was moved at the sight of four men attacking one woman, and despite his own sensitive situation he could see he might have to take a hand himself. He watched as the swordsman attacked with a slicing blow from the left. The woman parried it obliquely, but she was already wounded and

out of breath. The two blades clashed, and the knife was jolted from her hand and clattered to the ground. The swordsman then thrust his blade at her again, and she frantically dodged to the right, opening a way through which the man with the Devil's Head Knife charged towards the door.

Ignoring all dangers, the woman plunged her left hand into her gown and drew out two throwing knives which she slung at her enemy's back. One of the knives embedded itself in the door post but the other plunged into his back. Luckily for him, the woman's hand lacked strength due to the wound in her left shoulder and the knife did not kill him. He staggered back, screaming with pain, and pulled the knife out. Meanwhile, the woman was struck on her thigh by the staff. She swayed unsteadily, but defiantly resumed her position blocking the doorway.

"Go and help her," Lu said quietly to Yuanzhi. "If you can't beat them, I'll come over as well."

Yuanzhi was bursting to test herself. She leapt forward, her sword at the ready, shouting: "Four men fighting one woman! You should be ashamed of yourselves!" Seeing someone coming to the aid of the woman, and one of their number already wounded, the four men turned and ran from the inn.

The woman's face was deathly pale and she leaned against the door, breathing heavily. Yuanzhi went over to her.

"Why were they bullying you like that?" she asked, but the woman was temporarily incapable of speech.

Officer Deng walked over to Yuanzhi. "Madame Li would like to see you mistress," he said, and added in a whisper: "She's heard that you were involved in a fight on the road and is very upset. You'd better go quickly."

The woman's expression changed as soon as she saw Officer Deng's military uniform; she pulled her throwing knife out of the doorpost, went back into her room and banged the door shut without answering Yuanzhi.

Rather unhappy at having been snubbed, Yuanzhi walked over to Lu. "Teacher, what were they fighting about?" she asked.

"It was probably a revenge attack," he said. "But it isn't over yet. Those four

will be back."

Yuanzhi was about to ask another question when she heard someone inside the inn shouting and swearing.

"Damn your ancestors, what do you mean there are no good rooms? Are you afraid we don't have the money to pay?" It was the voice of Lead Escort Tong.

"Please don't be angry sir," an employee of the inn answered. "We in the inn-keeping business would not dare to offend such eminent persons as yourselves. But it is a fact that all of our few good rooms are occupied."

"Who have you got in them? I think I'll go and have a look," Tong said walking out into the courtyard.

Just then a door opened, and the young woman leaned out. "Please bring some hot water," she said to a servant.

Tong saw the woman's smooth white skin and the beauty of her face and eyes, and noticed on her left wrist, a bracelet of pearls, all perfectly formed. His mouth watered. The woman spoke with a southern Chinese accent and the exotic touch to her voice excited him greatly.

"I, Lead Escort Tong have passed along this road on business dozens of times, and I have never stayed in anything but the best rooms," he shouted. "If there are no good rooms vacant, why don't you make one vacant for me?" The door to the woman's room was still open and he walked straight inside.

"Ai-ya!" the woman exclaimed. She moved to obstruct him, but felt a stab of pain in her thigh and sat down.

As Tong entered the room, he saw there was a man lying on the kang. The room was dimly-lit but he could see that the man's head was wrapped in bandages, his right arm was in a sling and that one of his legs was also bandaged.

"Who is it?" the man asked in a deep, resonant voice.

"My name is Tong and I'm a lead escort with the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency," he replied. "We are passing through Sandaogou on business, but there are no rooms available here. I was wondering if you could move. Who is this

woman? Is she your wife, or your girlfriend?"

"Get out," the man ordered. His wounds were clearly serious; he was unable to talk loudly.

"One's a girl and the other's too badly wounded to even move," thought Tong, who had not seen the woman fight. "When am I going to get such a chance again?"

"If you don't want to give up your room, that's all right too," he said with a grin on his face. "All three of us can snuggle up together on this kang. Don't worry, I won't push over onto your side."

The man on the kang shook with anger.

"Don't get involved with these ruffians," the woman urged him quietly. "We can't afford to make any more enemies at the moment." And then to Tong: "You stop your nonsense and get out."

Tong laughed. "Can't I stay here and keep you company?"

"Come over here," the man on the kang said hoarsely.

Tong took a step towards him. "Why? Do you want to see how handsome I am?"

"I can't see clearly," the man replied.

Tong laughed out loud and took another step towards him. "Take a closer look. This is like a big brother choosing a husband for his sister...."

Before he could finish, the man on the kang sat up, and as fast as a lightning flash, touched a yuedao point (Yuedao points are nerve centres on the body which, when struck, can cause paralysis or even death. The same points are used for a different purpose in acupuncture) on Tong's ribs and followed with a blow to his back. Tong flew straight out of the door, and landed heavily in the courtyard. The agency shouter, Xun, rushed over to help him up.

"Brother Tong," he whispered. "Don't provoke them. It looks like they're members of the Red Flower Society."

"Ahh, ahhh, I can't move my leg," Tong cried. "The Red Flower Society?" he added suddenly. "How do you know?" He broke into a cold sweat of fear.

"One of the porters told me four Yamen officers were here a while ago to arrest those two, and there was quite a fight before they left," Xun said.

Lead Escort Yan came over. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Brother Yan," Tong shouted. "One of those bastards from the Red Flower Society used Yuedao kung fu on me!"

Yan frowned and pulled Tong up by his arm. "We'll go back to the room and talk about it," he said. His first thought was for the agency's reputation. It created a bad impression when an agency's lead escort was floored and couldn't even get up. Lead Escort Qian came over. "Are you sure it was the Red Flower Society?" he asked Xun.

"When those four officers left, they told the porter that the couple in there were fugitives," he whispered. "They told the porter to inform them if they left. I overheard them talking."

Qian glanced at Yan and pulled Tong up.

"Who are they?" Yan asked quietly.

"Red Flower Society. I think we ought to let it pass," Qian said. "When Tong is better we can reconsider. Did you see what happened when those men tried to arrest them just now?" he asked Xun.

"It was some fight," said Xun, gesticulating wildly. "There was a woman with a sword in her left hand and a dagger in her right hand. Four men couldn't beat her."

"She must be one of 'Divine Knife' Luo's people," replied Qian, surprised. "She used throwing knives, I suppose?"

"Yes, yes, she's really accurate. It was incredible!" Xun exclaimed.

Qian turned to Yan. "Master Wen of the Red Flower Society is here," he said. They carried Tong back to their room in silence.

Lu had observed the whole incident, but the lead escorts had talked in such low tones, that he only managed to catch Qian's last two utterances. Yuanzhi walked over and asked: "Teacher, when are you going to teach me Yuedao kung fu? Did you see how fantastic that move was?"

Lu took no notice of her, but said to himself: "If it is one of 'Divine Knife' Luo's people, I can't just stand by and do nothing."

"Who is 'Divine Knife' Luo?" Yuanzhi asked.

"He was a good friend of mine. I hear he's passed away now. All the moves used by the woman we saw fighting a minute ago were of his school."

Just then, the two lead escorts Qian and Tai helped Tong over to the woman's room. Xun coughed loudly outside the door and announced in a low voice:

"Lead Escorts Qian, Tai and Tong of the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency have come to pay their respects to Master Wen of the Red Flower Society."

The door creaked open and the woman stood in the doorway staring at them. "What do you want?" she asked.

"We did not know that you and Master Wen were here," Qian said. "We have insulted you and we have come to apologise. Please be forgiving and don't be offended by what happened." He bowed low and Tai and Xun followed suit.

"Mistress," Qian continued. "We have never met before, but I have heard a great deal about you and your husband. Master Wang, the head of our agency, was always on very good terms with the leader of your honourable society, Master Yu, and also with your father 'Divine Knife' Luo. Our brother here is very bad-tempered, and is always talking nonsense..."

The woman cut him off. "Our master has been wounded, and he just went to sleep. When he wakes, I will pass on your message. We are ignorant of etiquette, but his wounds are not light, and he hasn't slept well for two days." There was an expression of apprehension on her face.

"What sort of wounds does Master Wen have?" Qian asked. "We have some Golden Wound ointment with us." He wanted to put them in their debt so that they would be obliged to help cure Tong.

"Thank you, but we have medicine," the woman replied, understanding his meaning. "Your colleague was not touched on a major Yuedao point. When our master wakes, I will send one of the inn's servants round."

Seeing that she had agreed to cure Tong, Qian and the others started to retire.

"By the way," said the woman. "How did you know our names?"

"With your swords and throwing knives, who wouldn't be able to guess?" Qian replied. "What's more, who apart from Master Wen uses Yuedao kung fu like that? It had to be 'Rolling Thunder Hand' Wen Tailai and his wife Luo Bing."

The woman smiled, flattered at having been recognised.

Chapter 2

Lead Escort Tong eagerly led Zhang and the others to Iron Gall Manor. This time, having some support with him, he walked brazenly up to the manor gate.

"Tell your Lord to come out and receive Imperial officials," he shouted to an attendant.

The attendant turned to go inside, but Zhang decided they could not afford to offend such a respected man as Lord Zhou. "Say that we have come from Beijing and that there is some official business we would like to consult Lord Zhou about," he called.

He glanced meaningfully at Officer Wu, who nodded and went round to the rear of the Manor with one of the officers to prevent anyone escaping.

As soon as he heard the attendant's report, Meng knew the officers had come for Wen Tailai. He told Song to go out and keep them occupied, and then went immediately to Wen's room.

"Master Wen, there are some Eagle's Claws outside," he said. "There's nothing we can do. We'll just have to hide the three of you for a while."

He helped Wen up, and led him to a pavilion in the garden behind the Manor house. Meng and 'Scholar' Yu pushed aside a stone table in the pavilion, exposing an iron plate. They worked free an iron ring on top of the plate and pulled it up. Underneath was a cellar.

Just then, they heard people outside the back gate, and at the same time shouting from in front as Zhang forced his way through towards the garden. Wen saw that they were surrounded and hurried down the steps into the cellar. Meng replaced the iron plate, and pushed the stone table back over it with the help of two attendants. Zhou's young son kept getting in the way as he tried to help. Meng looked round quickly to make sure nothing was out of place, then ordered the attendants to open the rear gate.

Zhang and the others entered the garden. Seeing Tong amongst the group, Meng said coldly: "So you are an official. I should not have been so impolite to you earlier."

"I am a lead escort with the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency," Tong replied.

"Haven't you made a mistake, brother?" He looked round at Zhang. "I saw the three fugitives enter the manor. You should order a search, Master Zhang."

"We are peaceful citizens," said Song. "His Lordship, Master Zhou, is one of the most respected gentlemen west of the Yellow River. How could he dare to harbour either bandits or rebellious intentions?"

Meng asked Zhang to explain the purpose of his visit. Zhang did so, and Meng laughed out loud. "But the Red Flower Society is a secret society in south China," he protested. "Why would they come to the northwest border areas? This lead escort has a wild imagination."

Zhang and the rest were professionals, and they knew Wen was in the manor. If they conducted a thorough search and found him, there would be no problem. But if the search failed to find him, the matter would certainly not rest there. Causing offence to a man such as Lord Zhou was no game and they hesitated.

Worried that he would be laughed at if Wen wasn't caught that day, Tong decided to trick Zhou's son into talking. He smiled and took him by the hand, but the boy snatched his hand away.

"What are you doing?" he demanded.

"Little brother," Tong said. "Tell me where the three visitors who came to your house today are hiding and I'll give you this to buy sweets with." He took out a silver ingot and presented it to the boy.

The boy made a face at him. "Who do you think I am? Do you think any member of the Zhou family of Iron Gall manor would want your stinking money?"

Zhang studied the child's face and guessed he knew where Wen was hidden. "Just you wait until we find them," he warned. "We will behead not only your father, but you and your mother as well."

The boy raised his eyebrows. "I'm not afraid of you, so why would my father be afraid of you?" he replied.

Suddenly, Tong noticed the boy was wearing a pearl bracelet on his left wrist and recognised it immediately as Luo Bing's.

"Those pearls on your wrist. They belong to one of the visitors," he said. "You must have stolen them from her."

Why should I steal?" the boy replied angrily. "She gave them to me."

Tong laughed. "All right. She gave them to you. Well, where is she?"

"Why should I tell you?"

"Stop chattering with the child," Zhang interrupted. "They wouldn't let a child in on the great affairs of the Manor. He would certainly have been shooed away before they hid the three guests in their secret place."

As he hoped, the child rose to the bait. "How would you know?" he shouted.

Meng was becoming anxious. "Let's go inside, little brother," he said.

Zhang seized the opportunity. "Yes, go away little boy. You don't know anything."

The boy could stand it no longer. "I know!" he shouted. "They're in the garden, in the pavilion!"

Meng was greatly alarmed. "Little brother, what nonsense are you talking? Go inside quickly!"

As soon as the words were out, the boy knew he had made a mess of everything. He flew indoors, panic-stricken and on the verge of tears.

Zhang could see that the pavilion, wide and empty with red-painted railings around its sides, provided no hiding place. He leapt onto one of the railings and looked up into the roof, but saw no sign of a hiding-place. He jumped down again and stood silently, deep in thought. Then he had an idea.

"Master Meng," he smiled. "My kung fu is unsophisticated, but I have some clumsy strength. Let us have a competition."

"I wouldn't dare to be so presumptuous," Meng replied. "With weapons or without, I leave the choice to you."

Zhang laughed loudly. "There's no need for fighting, it would injure this amiable atmosphere. No, I suggest we take turns at trying to lift this stone table. I hope you won't laugh at me if I can't."

Meng started in fright. "No, it's...it's not a good..." he stuttered.

The others were surprised at Zhang's desire to engage Meng in a test of strength, and they watched intently as he pushed up his sleeves and grasped one of the round legs of the stone table with his right hand. He shouted the word "Lift!", and raised the 400-odd pound table off the ground using just the one hand.

They applauded him for his strength, but the shouts of applause quickly changed to calls of surprise as they noticed the iron plate that had been exposed.

The officers lifted up the plate and saw Wen in the hole beneath them, but none dared to go down and arrest him. They couldn't use darts either as they had been ordered to capture him alive, so all they could do was stand at the entrance to the cellar, weapons in hand, shouting at him.

"We've been betrayed by Iron Gall Manor," Wen said quietly to Luo Bing. "We are husband and wife, and I want you to promise me one thing."

"What's that?"

"Whatever I tell you to do in a moment, you must do."

Luo Bing nodded, her eyes full of tears.

"Wen Tailai is here," Wen shouted. "What's all the noise about?"

A sudden silence descended on the group above.

"My leg is wounded," Wen added. "Send a rope down and lift me up."

Zhang turned round to ask Meng to get some rope, but he had disappeared, so he ordered an attendant to go instead. A length of rope was brought, and an Imperial Bodyguard named Cheng Huang grabbed one end and threw the other down into the cellar and lifted Wen out.

As soon as his feet touched the ground, Wen jerked the rope out of Cheng Huang's hands, and with a roar, whirled it round and round his head. Caught off guard, Zhang and the others ducked in panic as the rope swept towards them. Tong, who had already suffered at Wen's hand, had hidden behind the others, and didn't see the rope until it was too late. With the piercing force of an iron rod, the rope smashed solidly into his back, knocking him to the ground.

Two other Imperial Bodyguards, Rui and Yan, raced towards Wen from either side while 'Scholar' Yu, wielding the Golden Flute, leapt up the stone steps and attacked Cheng Huang.

Cheng was wielding a brass staff, but despite its advantage of length over the flute, Yu quickly forced him onto the defensive. Luo Bing limped up the steps, supporting herself with her sword, but found her way blocked by a tall, muscular man standing at the mouth of the cellar, with his hands on his hips. She pulled out a throwing knife and threw it at him. The man, Zhang, made no move until the knife was only an inch from his nose, then stretched out his hand and grabbed it by the hilt. Luo Bing saw his leisurely reaction, and drew a ragged breath.

Zhang forced her sword to one side, then gave her a push which threw her off balance. She fell back down into the cellar.

Wen, meanwhile, was battling simultaneously with the two Imperial Bodyguards, Rui and Yan. His mind was numb with the excruciating pain from his wounds, and he fought like a madman, striking out wildly. Yu, however, had gained the upper hand in his fight with Cheng Huang. Zhang noticed his technique contained many elements peculiar to the Wudang School. Greatly surprised, he was about to go over and question him, when Yu suddenly jumped back into the cellar to help Luo Bing.

"Are you all right?" he asked her.

"It's nothing. Go and help Fourth Brother."

"I'll support you up," Yu said.

Wen looked around and saw that his wife had not yet managed to get out of the cellar, and he realised he could continue no longer. He threw himself at Cheng Huang, paralysed him with a blow to the kidneys, then grabbed him round the waist and fell into the cellar with him.

They landed on the cellar floor with Wen on top of Cheng Huang, neither of them able to move. Luo Bing quickly helped Wen up. His face was completely drained of colour and covered in sweat, but he forced a smile, and with a "Wa" sound, a mouthful of blood sprayed out onto the front of her tunic. Yu understood what Wen was planning, and shouted. "Make way! Make way!"

With Cheng Huang in the hands of the enemy, Zhang decided against any precipitous action. He heard Yu's shout and waved his arm at the others, indicating they should clear a path for them.

The first one out of the cellar was Cheng Huang with Luo Bing grasping his collar and holding the point of a dagger to the small of his back. Next came Yu supporting Wen. The four shuffled slowly out, pushing and pulling each other as they came.

"If anyone moves, this man dies," Luo Bing shouted.

The four passed through the forest of swords and spears and made their way slowly towards the rear gate. Luo Bing spotted three horses tied to the willow trees just outside, and she silently thanked Heaven and Earth.

Zhang could see the fugitives were about to escape and decided that capturing Wen Tailai and taking him back to Beijing was more important than saving Cheng Huang's life. He picked up the rope Wen had thrown on the ground, fashioned it into a lasso and flung it at Wen using all his Inner Strength. The rope flew whistling through the air and encircled Wen, and with a tug, Zhang pulled him out of Yu's grasp. Wen cried out and Luo Bing turned to help him, ignoring Cheng Huang. But her thigh was wounded, and she fell to the ground before she had taken two steps.

"Go! Go quickly!" Wen shouted.

"I'll die with you," said Luo Bing.

"You agreed that you would do what I told you..." he replied angrily, but before he could finish, the officers swarmed over him. Yu raced over and picked Luo Bing up, then charged straight out of the gate. One officer moved to stop him, but one of Yu's legs flew up and kicked him so hard that he fell to the ground five or six paces away.

Yu ran with her over to the horses and placed her on the back of one just as three officers raced through the gates after them.

"Use your throwing knives, quick!" he shouted.

A string of knives flashed out from her hand and there was a blood-curdling shriek as one of them planted itself in the shoulder of one of the officers. Yu

freed the reins of the three horses, mounted one and pulled the head of the third round so that it faced the gate. He rapped it sharply on the rump with his flute and the horse charged straight to the officers, trapping them in the gateway. In the confusion, Yu and Luo Bing galloped off.

Luo Bing lay on the horse in a semi-delirious state. She tried on several occasions to pull the horse round and return to Iron Gall Manor, but each time Yu stopped her. He slowed the pace only when he was sure there was no-one chasing them.

Another mile further on, Yu saw four riders approaching led by a man with a flowing white beard: it was the Lord of Iron Gall Manor, Zhou Zhongying. Seeing Yu and Luo Bing, he reined in his horse and called out:

"Honoured guests, please stop! I have called for a doctor."

Full of hatred, Luo Bing flung a throwing knife at him. Zhou started in fright, and threw himself down flat on his horse, and the knife flew over his back. Behind him, one of his followers deflected the knife with a stroke from his sword, and it plunged into the trunk of a large willow tree beside the road. The rays of the blood-red setting sun reflected off the blade, the light flashing and dancing all around them. Just as Zhou was about to question them, Luo Bing began cursing him.

"You old thief! You betrayed my husband! I will have my revenge on you!" she shouted, tears coursing down her face. She urged her horse forward, brandishing her pair of swords.

"Let us discuss this first," Zhou called out, greatly puzzled.

"We must save Fourth Brother first," Yu said to Luo Bing, restraining her. "We can raze Iron Gall Manor to the ground once we've rescued him."

Luo Bing saw the logic in what he said, and pulled the head of her horse round. She spat on the ground in hate, slapped her horse and galloped off.

Lord Zhou wondered what was behind this young girl's anger and questioned the attendant who had been sent to the town to fetch a doctor. But he said only that when he left, Lady Zhou and Master Meng had been looking after the guests, and that there had been no disagreements.

Zhou galloped all the way back to the manor, and strode quickly inside shouting: "Call Meng!"

"Master Meng is with her Ladyship," one of the attendants told him. Then the rest all began talking at once, giving him accounts of what had happened, how the officers had arrested Wen Tailai and taken him away, and had left the manor only a short while before.

"Who told the officers the three guests were hiding in the cellar?" Zhou asked.

The attendants looked at each other, not daring to speak. The sound of Zhou's two iron balls clacking together in his hand was even louder than usual. "What are you all standing there for?" he shouted. "Go and get Meng quickly!"

As he spoke, Meng ran in.

"Who let the secret out?" Zhou shouted hoarsely. "Tell me! You..."

Meng hesitated, and said: "The Eagle's Claws found it out for themselves."

"Nonsense!" Zhou roared. "How would that bunch of dog thieves ever find a place as well-hidden as my cellar?"

Meng did not answer, not daring to meet his master's gaze. Lady Zhou came in hugging her son, but Zhou ignored her.

His gaze swung round to Song's face. "As soon as you saw the officers, you took fright and talked, didn't you?" he shouted. Meng was trustworthy but Song was a coward and knew no kung fu.

"No...it wasn't me who talked," he replied, scared out of his wits. "It was...it was the young...the young master."

Zhou's heart missed a beat. "Come over here," he said to his son.

The boy walked, cringing, over to his father.

"Was it you who told the officers that the three guests were in the garden cellar?" he asked.

The boy had never dared to lie to his father, but he could not bring himself to confess. Zhou brandished his whip.

"Will you speak?" he shouted.

The boy looked at his mother, so scared he wanted to cry. Lady Zhou walked over and stood close beside him.

Meng saw that the deception would not work. "Master," he said. "The officers were very cunning. They made out that if the young master did not talk, he would be a coward."

"You wanted to be a hero, so you told them, is that correct?" Zhou shouted.

The boy's face was drained of colour. "Yes, father," he replied quietly.

Zhou could not control his anger. "Is that any way for a brave hero to act?" he shouted. He threw the two iron balls in his right hand at the opposite wall in frustration, but at that very moment, his son threw himself into his arms to beg for mercy, and one of the balls hit the boy square on the head. Zhou had put all of his rage into the throw and its power was extraordinary. Blood sprayed in all directions.

Greatly shocked, Zhou quickly took hold of his son and embraced him.

"Father," the boy said. "I...I won't do it again...Don't hit me..." He was dead before he finished speaking. Everyone in the room was stunned into silence.

Lady Zhou grabbed her son, shouting: "Child, child!" When she saw he had stopped breathing, she stared dumbly at him for a moment then, like a crazed tiger, struck out at Zhou.

"Why...why did you kill the child?" she sobbed.

Zhou shook his head and retreated two paces. "I... I didn't..."

Lady Zhou put down her son's corpse, and grabbed a sword from the scabbard of one of the attendants. She leapt forward and struck out at her husband, but he made no move to avoid the blow.

"It will be better if we all die," he said, closing his eyes.

Seeing him in such a state, her hand loosened. She dropped the sword to the ground and ran out of the hall, sobbing.

Luo Bing and Yu Yutong kept to the back roads for fear of meeting Yamen officers and rode on until the sky was completely black. The countryside was

desolate: there were no inns and they couldn't even find a farmhouse. They stopped to rest beside a large rock.

Yu released the horses to graze, then cut some grass with Luo Bing's sword and spread it out on the ground.

"Now we have a bed, but no food or water," he said. "All we can do is wait until tomorrow and try to think of something then."

Luo Bing cared about nothing but her husband. She cried continuously. Yu comforted her, saying the Red Flower Society would certainly come in force to help them rescue Fourth Brother. Luo Bing was exhausted, and hearing his words, she relaxed and soon fell into a deep sleep.

In her dream, she seemed to meet her husband, who held her gently in his arms, and lightly kissed her on the mouth. She felt deliciously happy and lazily let her husband embrace her.

"I've been so miserable thinking about you," she said. "Are all your wounds healed?"

Wen mumbled a few words and held her even tighter, kissed her even more passionately. Just as she was beginning to feel aroused, she suddenly started in fright and awoke. Under the starlight, she could see that the person embracing her was not her husband, but Yu.

"I've been miserable thinking about you too!" he whispered.

Ashamed and angry, Luo Bing slapped him heavily on the face, fought her way free and stumbled away a few steps. She fumbled for her knives, and shouted harshly: "What are you doing?"

Yu was stunned. "Listen to me..."

"You listen to me!" she replied angrily. "Which four classes of people does the Red Flower Society kill?"

"Tartars and Manchus; corrupt officials; landlords and tyrants; and villains and scoundrels," Yu recited quietly, his head hung low.

The space between Luo Bing's eyebrows closed. "Which four crimes by Red Flower Society members are punishable by death?"

"Death to those who surrender to the Manchu Court. Death to those who betray the Society...death to those who betray their friends, and death to those who violate others'...wives and daughters."

"If you have the guts, you will quickly punish yourself with the 'Three Thrusts and Six Holes'!" Luo Bing shouted.

According to the Society's code, a member who had committed an offence in a moment of confusion and sincerely regretted it could pierce his own thigh three times with a knife so that it penetrated right through, an act known as the 'Three Thrusts and Six Holes.' The member could then plead to the Great Helmsman for forgiveness, and could hope that his case would be dealt with leniently.

"I beg you to kill me," Yu cried. "If I die at your hand, I will still die happy."

Luo Bing's anger blazed even more intensely. She raised the knife in her hand, her wrist steeled, ready to throw.

"You don't know anything," Yu said in a shaky voice. "How much I have suffered for you over the last five or six years. From the moment I first saw you, my heart...was...no longer my own."

"I was already Fourth Brother's then," Luo Bing said angrily. "Do you mean you didn't know?"

"I...knew I couldn't control myself, so I never dared to see too much of you. Whenever the Society had any business to be done, I always begged the Great Helmsman to send me to do it. The others thought I was just hardworking, no-one knows I was really avoiding you. When I was away working, there was never a day or an hour when I did not think of you."

He took a step towards her and pulled up his left sleeve, exposing his arm. "I hate myself," he said. "I curse my heart for the animal it is. Every time the hatred overcomes me, I cut myself with a knife here. Look!"

Under the dim starlight, Luo Bing saw his arm was covered in motley scars, and her heart involuntarily softened.

"I always think, why couldn't Heaven have allowed me to meet you before you married," he continued. "We are about the same age, but the difference in age between you and Fourth Brother is huge."

Luo Bing's anger surged up once more. "What does the difference in our ages matter? Fourth Brother is loving and just, a great man. How could he be compared with someone like you, you..."

She gave a snort of contempt, then turned and walked over to her horse. As she struggled to mount it, Yu went over to help her up, but she shouted "Keep away!" and got up of her own accord.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"It's none of your business. With Fourth Brother in the hands of the Eagle's Claws, I might as well be dead anyway. Give me my swords."

Yu lowered his head and handed the pair of swords to her.

Seeing him standing there, so lost and bewildered, Luo Bing suddenly said: "As long as you seriously work for the good of the Society, and are never impolite to me ever again, I won't tell anyone about what happened tonight. And I'll also help you find a nice girl who has both talent and beauty."

She smiled briefly, slapped her horse and rode off.

Luo Bing rode on for a mile or so, then stopped, searching the sky for the North Star to get her bearings. If she went west, she would meet up with the fighters of the Red Flower Society; to go east would be to follow after her captured husband. She knew that, wounded as she was, it would be impossible for her to save him single-handed, but with her husband heading eastwards, how could she possibly turn away from him? Broken-hearted, she let her horse wander unrestrained for a few miles. Then, seeing she had already travelled a long way from Yu, she dismounted and settled down to sleep in a spinney of small trees. Angry and bitter, she cried for a while and then fell into a deep sleep. In the middle of the night, she woke suddenly with a burning fever and called out in a blurred voice: "Water! I must drink water!" But there was no-one to hear her.

Next day, her condition was even worse. She managed with a struggle to sit up, but her head hurt so badly she was forced to lie down again. She slept, and awoke feeling the sun beating down on her head. She watched as it sank towards the west. She was thirsty and hungry, but remounting the horse was impossible.

"It is not important that I die here," she thought. "But I will never see Fourth Brother again." Her eyes glazed over and she fainted away.

Suddenly, she heard someone say: "Good. She's coming round!"

She slowly opened her eyes and saw a young, doe-eyed girl standing beside her. The girl was eighteen or nineteen years old with a tanned face and thick eyebrows. She looked very happy to see Luo Bing awaken.

"Go quickly and get some millet gruel for the Lady to drink," she told a maid.

Luo Bing realized she was lying on a kang in between the folds of a quilt. The room she was in was clean and tastefully furnished, obviously in the house of a very wealthy family.

"What is your honourable surname, miss?" she asked the girl.

"My surname is Zhou. You sleep for a while. We can talk again later."

The girl watched as Luo Bing ate a bowl of gruel and then quietly left. Luo Bing closed her eyes and slept once more.

When she woke, the lamps had already been lit. Outside the door, she heard a girl's voice saying loudly:

"Father shouldn't have allowed them to bully people and run riot here in Iron Gall Manor! If it had been me, I would have taught them a good lesson!"

Luo Bing started in fright when she heard the words 'Iron Gall Manor'. The girl and her maid walked into the room and looked through the canopy over the kang, but Luo Bing closed her eyes and pretended to be asleep. The girl went over to the wall and took down a sword. Luo Bing noticed her own swords on a table close by and prepared herself. If the girl struck out at her, she would throw the quilt over her head, grab the swords and fight her way out. But all she heard was the maid saying:

"Mistress, you mustn't make any more trouble. His Lordship is very distressed. Don't make him angry again."

"Huh! I don't care," the girl replied. She raced out of the room, sword in hand, with the maid at her heels.

Luo Bing guessed correctly that the girl was Lord Zhou's daughter, Zhou Qi.

She was a bold, straight-forward person, very much like her father, and had a love of minding other people's business. On the day Wen was seized, she had wounded someone in a fight, and had spent the night away from home, planning to wait for her father's anger to subside before returning. On her way back, she came across Luo Bing unconscious by the road and brought her to the manor, where she discovered to her horror that her father had killed her brother, and her mother had run off.

"If they can betray Fourth Brother to the authorities, why did they save me?" she thought darkly. "There must be some other evil scheme afoot."

The wound on her thigh had not yet healed, and she couldn't afford the slightest mistake. Having been in the Manor once before, she had a vague idea of its layout, and planned to stealthily make her way round to the garden, and then leave by the back gate. But as she passed by the great hall, she saw the lamps were burning brightly inside and heard someone talking very loudly. There was something familiar about the voice, and she put her eye close to a crack in the door and saw Lord Zhou in conversation with two other men, one of whom she recognised as Lead Escort Tong. Seeing him, she thought again of her husband's cruel fate and immediately ceased to care about whether she lived or died. She pushed open the door and slung a throwing knife at Tong.

With his wife missing and his son dead, Zhou had spent two unhappy days fretting endlessly.

After nightfall on the second day, an attendant reported that two visitors had arrived, and Zhou ordered Meng to receive them. One was Tong, the other an Imperial Bodyguard surnamed Pan, one of the fighters who had helped to seize Wen. Meng guessed that no good would come of the visit.

"His Lordship is not feeling well," he told them. "If you have any message, I will convey it for you."

Tong laughed. "We are here on a goodwill visit," he said. "Whether Lord Zhou sees us or not is up to him. Iron Gall Manor is faced with a crisis that may destroy every member of the Zhou family. What is the point of putting on such airs?"

Meng had no option but to allow them through. The iron balls in Zhou's hand clacked sharply together as he listened to what the visitors had to say.

"What do you mean by saying Iron Gall Manor is faced with a crisis?" he demanded.

Bodyguard Pan pulled a letter from his gown and spread it out on the table, holding it down with both hands as if afraid that Zhou would snatch it away. Zhou peered down and saw it was a letter written to him by 'Hidden Needle' Lu Feiqing of the Wudang School asking him to help some friends of the Red Flower Society who were in difficulties.

Wen had had no opportunity to present the letter to Zhou, and it was found when he was searched after being captured. Lu was a well-known fugitive, and the letter clearly indicated he was collaborating with Iron Gall Manor. The bodyguards had discussed the matter, and decided that reporting the existence of the letter to their superiors would not necessarily result in Lu's capture and could even increase their own workload. It would be more beneficial to use the letter to extort a sum of money from Zhou and divide it up amongst themselves.

Zhou was shocked at the sight of the letter. "What do you gentlemen want?" he asked.

"We have long admired the famous Lord Zhou," said Pan. "We know of your enthusiasm for charity and making new friends. Friends are much more important than money, and I'm sure you spend thousands of silver ingots to establish friendship without even creasing half an eyebrow. You of course realise, Lord Zhou, that if the authorities ever see this letter, the consequences would be disastrous. When we brothers found it, we resolved to destroy it in the spirit of friendship, even though it meant risking our own heads. Everyone agreed never to say a word about Iron Gall Manor harbouring the fugitive Wen Tailai. We decided to shoulder this monstrous responsibility and not to report to our superiors."

"That was very good of you," Zhou replied dryly.

"But," Pan continued, "The thing is that we brothers have had a lot of expenses on this trip out of the capital. We are carrying heavy debts. If perhaps Lord Zhou could spare a thought for us, we would feel eternally grateful."

Zhou was extremely angry. He had let down his friends, his beloved son had died as a result, and the officers were to blame. Now these same officers had come back to try to blackmail him.

"We are villains, that is true," Tong said. "We villains accomplish little and bungle much. If we had to build a Manor as big as this one, we'd have to admit defeat. But if we were asked to destroy it..."

Before he could finish, Zhou's daughter, Zhou Qi charged into the hall, and shouted harshly: "Let me see you try!"

Zhou motioned to his daughter and the two walked out of the hall. "Go and tell Meng that whatever happens, these two Eagle's Claws must not be allowed to leave the Manor!" he whispered.

"Good!" replied Zhou Qi, very pleased. "I was getting angrier and angrier listening outside."

Zhou returned to the hall.

"Since you refuse to do us this favour Lord Zhou, we will take our leave of you," Bodyguard Pan said. He picked up Lu's letter and ripped it to shreds as Zhou stood by dumbfounded, completely taken aback.

"This is a duplicate of the letter," Pan explained. "The original letter is with the 'Fire Hand Judge' Zhang Zhaozhong."

It was at that moment that Luo Bing's throwing knife flew towards Tong. Zhou detested Tong, but he couldn't allow him to die in the Manor.

Everyone held their breaths and stayed completely silent, not daring to make any sound that would give away their position.

In the midst of the silence, footsteps sounded outside the hall. The door was thrown open and a shaft of light struck their eyes as a man carrying a burning torch strode in. He was dressed as a scholar, and in his left hand, he held a golden flute. As soon as he had passed through the door, he stood to one side and raised the torch up high, lighting the way as three other men entered. One was a one-armed Taoist priest with a sword slung across his back. The second man, wearing a light gown loosely tied around the waist, looked like the son of

a nobleman. He was followed by a young boy in his teens who held a bundle in his hands. They were in fact 'Scholar' Yu, the Taoist priest Wu Chen, and the newly-appointed Great Helmsman of the Red Flower Society, Chen Jialuo. The young boy was Chen's attendant, Xin Yan.

Yu presented Zhou with a letter of introduction, bowed, and then announced in a loud voice: "The Great Helmsman of the Red Flower Society has come to pay his respects to Lord Zhou of IronGall Manor."

Zhou put his hands together in salute. "Honoured guests," he said. "Welcome to my humble Manor. Please be seated."

The tables and chairs in the great hall had all been overturned and thrown about during the fight and everything was in great disorder.

"Attendants," Zhou roared. The tables and chairs were quickly rearranged, the candles relit and the guests and hosts seated. Great Helmsman Chen took the first of the guest's seats on the eastern side of the hall and was followed, in order of seniority, by the other Red Flower Society heroes. Zhou took the first seat on the western side, followed in order by Meng, Zhou Qi and his attendants.

Yu stole a glance at Luo Bing's beautiful, joyless face. He had no idea if she had told anyone of his misdemeanor. After she had left him that night, he had not known where to go, but after two days of roaming around aimlessly, he ran into Great Helmsman Chen and Priest Wu Chen, who were on their way to Iron Gall Manor.

With the two sides being so polite to each other, Bodyguard Pan could see the game was up and began to sidle towards the door in the hope of slipping out unnoticed. But Xu leapt over and blocked his path.

"Please stay here," he said. "Let us all explain our positions clearly first."

Pan did not dare to object.

"Master Wen Tailai, our humble society's Fourth Brother, was attacked by the Eagle's Claws and suffered a serious injury," Chen said coldly. "He came to you for refuge, and we are much indebted to you for the assistance extended to him. All the brothers of our society are grateful, and I take this opportunity to offer our thanks."

He stood and bowed deeply.

Zhou hurriedly returned the bow, extremely embarrassed.

"Great Helmsman, you don't understand!" Zhang Jin shouted, jumping up. "He betrayed Fourth Brother!"

'Leopard' Wei, who was sitting next to Zhang Jin, gave him a push and told him to shut up.

"Our brothers have travelled through the night to call on you," Chen continued, ignoring the interruption. "We have all been extremely anxious about Brother Wen. We are unaware of the state of his injuries, but I imagine you would have invited a doctor to treat him. If it is convenient, Lord Zhou, we would like you to take us to him."

He stood up, and the heroes of the Red Flower Society followed suit.

Zhou stammered, momentarily unable to answer.

"Fourth Brother was killed by them," Luo Bing shouted, her voice choked with sobs. "Great Helmsman, we must kill this old peasant in payment for Fourth Brother's life!"

Chen turned pale. Zhang Jin, Yang and a number of the others drew their weapons and moved forward threateningly.

"Master Wen did come to our humble Manor..." Meng began.

"Well then, please take us to see him," Xu broke in.

"When Master Wen, Mistress Luo Bing and Master Yu here arrived, our Lord was not at home," Meng replied. "It was I who dispatched someone to fetch a doctor. Mistress Luo Bing and Master Yu saw that with their own eyes. Later, the court officers arrived. We are extremely ashamed to say that we were unable to protect our guests and Master Wen was captured. Master Chen, you blame us for not looking after him properly and for failing to fulfil our responsibility to protect friends. We admit it. If you wish to kill us, I for one will not bat an eyelid. But to point your finger at our Lord and accuse him of betraying a friend, what sort of talk is that?"

Luo Bing jumped forward a step and pointed at Meng accusingly. "You!" she

shouted. "I ask you! Such a well-concealed hiding-place as that cellar: if you weren't in the pay of the Eagles's Claws, how would they have known where we were?"

Meng was speechless.

"Lord Zhou, at the time of the incident, you may not actually have been at home," Priest Wu added. "But just as a dragon has a head, men have masters. As this concerns Iron Gall Manor, we must ask you to explain."

Bodyguard Pan, cowering to one side, suddenly spoke up. "It was his son that talked," he shouted. "Is he willing to admit it?"

"Lord Zhou, is this true?" Great Helmsman Chen asked.

Zhou nodded slowly. The heroes of the Red Flower Society roared in anger and moved in even closer, some glaring at Zhou, some looking at Chen, waiting for his signal.

Chen gave Pan a sidelong glance. "And who are you, sir?" he asked.

"He's an Eagle's Claw," Luo Bing said. "He was one of those that seized Fourth Brother."

Chen slowly walked over to Pan, then suddenly snatched the iron hoop out of his grasp, whipped both his hands behind his back and held them together. Pan gave a shout and struggled unsuccessfully to break free.

"Where have you taken Brother Wen?" Chen shouted. Pan kept his mouth shut, and an expression of proud insolence appeared on his face. Chen's fingers touched the 'Central Mansion Yuedao' below Pan's ribs. "Will you talk?" he asked.

Pan yelled out in pain. Chen touched his 'Tendon Centraction' Yuedao point. This time, Pan could endure it no longer.

"I'll talk...I'll talk," he whispered. "They're taking him to Beijing."

"He...he isn't dead then?" Luo Bing asked quickly.

"Of course he isn't dead," Pan replied. "He's an important criminal, who would dare to kill him?"

The heroes all breathed a sigh of relief, and Luo Bing's heart overflowed with happiness, and she fainted away, falling backwards to the floor. Yu stretched out his hand to catch her, but then suddenly pulled it back again. Her head hit the ground, and Zhang Jin hurriedly knelt down beside her.

"Fourth Sister!" he called, giving Yu a sidelong glance full of disdain. "Are you all right?"

Chen relaxed his grip on Pan's hands. "Tie him up," he said to his boy attendant, Xin Yan, who tied Pan's hands firmly behind his back.

"Brothers!" Chen said loudly. "It is vitally important that we save Fourth Brother. We can settle our accounts here another time."

The heroes of the Red Flower Society voiced their assent in unison. Luo Bing was sitting on a chair crying with joy. Hearing Chen's words, she stood up with Zhang Jin's support.

The heroes walked to the door of the hall, escorted by Meng. Chen turned and said to Zhou: "Our apologies for the inconvenience we have caused you. We will meet again."

Zhou knew from his tone that the Red Flower Society would return to seek vengeance.

"Once we've saved Brother Wen, I, the hunchback Zhang, will be the first to return to do battle with you, you old peasant!" Zhang Jin shouted.

Zhou Qi leapt forward a step. "What sort of creature are you that you would dare to curse my father?"

"Huh!" he replied. "Go and call your big brother out and tell him I wish to meet him."

"My big brother?" she asked, puzzled.

"If he has the guts to betray a friend, he should have the guts to meet another friend," Zhang Jin added. "Your big brother betrayed our Fourth Brother. Where is he hiding?"

"This hunchback's talking nonsense," Zhou Qi said. "I don't have an elder brother."

"All right," Zhou said angrily. "I will hand over my son to you. Follow me!"

Suddenly, there were shots from outside of "Fire! Fire!", and flames began to cast a glow into the great hall.

Zhou paid no attention. He strode out and Great Helmsman Chen and the others followed him through two courtyards. The fire was already burning fiercely and the heat from the flame was oppressive. In the dark of the night, the red glow reached skywards through the billows of smoke.

"Let's work together to put out the fire out first," Xu called.

"You tell someone to commit arson and then pretend to be a good man!" Zhou Qi said indignantly. She remembered his shout earlier about setting fire to the Manor, and was convinced that the Red Flower Society was responsible. Full of grief and resentment, she struck out at him with her sword, but Xu nimbly dodged out of the way.

Zhou appeared not to noticed any of this, and continued to walk towards the rear hall of the Manor. As they entered the hall, they could see that it was arranged for a funeral. A pair of lighted candles were placed on the altar before the 'Spirit Tablet' bearing the name of the deceased, along with white streamers and piles of 'death money' for the deceased to spend in the other world. Zhou parted a set of white curtains, revealing a small black coffin with its lid still open.

"My son revealed Master Wei's hiding place, it is true," he said. "If you want him...then take him!" His voice suddenly broke. In the sombre candlelight, the heroes looking into the coffin and saw the corpse of a small child.

"My brother was only ten years old," Zhou Qi shouted. "He didn't understand what was going on. He was tricked into letting out the secret. When father returned, he was so angry, he killed my brother by mistake, and as a result, my mother has left home. Are you satisfied yet? If not, why don't you kill my father and myself as well?"

The heroes realised they had unjustly accused Zhou, and that the whole incident should never have happened. Zhang Jin, who was the most direct of them all, leapt forward and kowtowed before Zhou, his head hitting the floor with a resounding thump.

"Master," he cried. "I have wronged you. The hunchback Zhang begs your forgiveness."

Chen and the other heroes all came forward one by one to apologise. Zhou hurriedly returned the bow.

"Never will we forget the assistance that Lord Zhou has extended to the Red Flower Society," Chen called out. "Brothers, the important thing now is to put out the fire. Everyone lend a hand quickly."

The heroes raced out of the hall. But the flames were already lighting up the sky, and the sound of roof tiles smashing to the ground, and of rafters and pillars collapsing intermingled in confusion with the shouts and cries of the Manor attendants. The Anxi region is famous throughout China as a 'wind storehouse', and the wind now stoked the flames. It was soon clear that the fire could not be extinguished, and that the great Iron Gall Manor would soon be completely razed.

The heat in the rear hall was intense, and the cloth streamers and paper money on the altar were already smouldering. But Zhou remained beside the coffin.

"Father, father!" Zhou Qi shouted as the flames started to curl into the hall. "We must leave!"

Zhou took no notice, and continued to gaze at his son in the coffin, unwilling to leave him there to be cremated.

Zhang Jin bent over and shouted: "Eighth Brother, put the coffin on my back."

Yang grasped hold of the two sides of the coffin, and with a surge of strength, lifted it up and placed it on Zhang Jin's hunched back. Maintaining his crouching position, Zhang Jin then charged out of the hall. Zhou Qi supported her father, and with the others gathered around to protect them, they ran outside the Manor. Not long after, the roof of the rear hall collapsed, and they all shuddered at the thought of how close it had been.

"Ai-ya!" Zhou Qi suddenly shouted. "That Eagle's Claw Tong may still be inside!"

"For people as evil as him, being burnt alive is not an unjust end," 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi replied.

"Who?" Chen asked.

Meng told them about how Tong had come to Iron Gall Manor, first to spy, next as a guide for the officers when they came to seize Wen, and finally to engage in blackmail.

"Yes!" Xu shouted. "It must have been him who started the fire." He glanced furtively over at Zhou Qi and saw that she was also looking at him out of the corner of her eye. As soon as their eyes met, they both turned their heads away.

"We must catch this man Tong and bring him back," Chen said. "Brothers Xu, Yang, Wei and Zhang: the four of you go and search along the roads to the north, south, east and west. Come back to report within two hours whether you find him or not."

The four left, and Chen went over to apologise to Zhou once again.

"Lord Zhou," he said. "The Red Flower Society is responsible for your being brought to this state of affairs. Our debt to you will be difficult to repay. But we will find Lady Zhou and invite her to return to you. Iron Gall Manor has been destroyed, and we undertake to have it completely rebuilt. All your people will receive full compensation from the Society for whatever they have lost."

"What kind of talk is that, Master Chen?" Zhou replied. "Wealth and riches are not a part of the flesh. If you continue with that sort of talk, you will not be treating us as friends."

He had been greatly upset at the sight of Iron Gall Manor burn down, but he valued friendship above all, and now that the misunderstanding had been cleared up, he was happy to have established relations with so many heroes in such a short time. But a moment later, he caught sight of the tiny coffin and another wave of sorrow flooded his heart.

The four heroes sent out to look for Tong returned with nothing to report, and they guessed that he must have taken advantage of the fire and confusion to escape.

"Luckily we know that the fellow is with the Zhen Yuan Escort Agency," Chen said. "We will catch him one day no matter where he runs to. Lord Zhou, where should the attendants of your honourable manor and their families go for

temporary refuge?"

"I think they should all go to Chijinwei, the town to the east of here, after it gets light," Zhou replied.

"I have a small suggestion, Your Lordship," Xu said.

"Brother Xu is nicknamed 'The Kung Fu Mastermind,'" Chen explained to Zhou. "He is the wisest and most resourceful of us all."

Zhou Qi gave Xu a look of contempt and harrumphed.

"Please speak, Brother Xu," Zhou said hurriedly, embarrassed by his daughter's behaviour.

"When Tong gets back, he is certain to embellish his story with a lot of nonsense, accusing Your Lordship of many more crimes," Xu replied. "I think it would be best for your people to go westwards and lie low for a while until we have evaluated the situation. It may not be safe for them to go to Chijinwei now."

Zhou agreed immediately. "Yes, you're right," he said. "I will send them to Anxi first thing tomorrow. I have friends there they can stay with." He turned to his attendant, Song. "You take them all to Anxi," he said. "When you get there, you can stay temporarily at the residence of Great Official Wu. All expenses are to be paid by us. I will contact you when I have completed my business."

"Father, aren't we going to Anxi too?" Zhou Qi asked.

"Of course not. Master Wen was seized in our Manor. How can we stand by and do nothing when he has still to be rescued?"

Zhou Qi and Meng were delighted at the news.

"We are greatly moved by your goodwill, Lord Zhou." Chen said. "But saving Brother Wen is an act of rebellion. You are peaceful citizens. It would be best to leave it up to us."

"You needn't worry about implicating us," Zhou replied, stroking his beard. "And if you do not allow me to risk my life for a friend, then you are not treating me as a friend."

Chen thought for a second then agreed.

"Time is pressing," Zhou added. "Please issue your orders, Master Chen."

The embers of Iron Gall Manor had not yet been extinguished and the smell of burning wood hung heavily in the air. As they listened solemnly to Chen's orders, the flames crackled to life again, fanned by the wind.

The Twin Knights had been sent on ahead to discover Wen's whereabouts, and 'Scholar' Yu was told to link up with them, while the rest of the heroes split up into groups of two and three.

"Fourteenth Brother, please start out immediately," Chen said to Yu. "The others should rest or sleep here on the ground. We will meet up again inside the Great Wall. The Eagles's Claws on the Jiayu Gate will most probably be examining everyone rigorously, so we must be careful."

Yu saluted the heroes with his fists, and mounted his horse. As he rode off, he glanced furtively round at Luo Bing, but she was deep in thought with her head bowed. He sighed, whipped his horse and galloped wildly off.

"Seventh Brother," Chen said quietly to 'Mastermind' Xu. "You go with Luo Bing and Lord Zhou. Take extra care that no officials recognise him. Fourth Sister is wounded and she is greatly feeling the absence of Brother Wen, so you must be careful not to let her do anything rash. There is no need for you to travel fast. Just avoid getting involved in any fighting."

Xu nodded.

They settled down to sleep, but less than four hours later, dawn broke. 'Thousand Arm Buddha' Zhao with Zhang Jin and 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi were the first to leave. Luo Bing, who had not closed her eyes the whole night, called Zhang Jin over.

"Tenth Brother, you are not allowed to cause any trouble on the road," she said.

"Don't worry," he replied. "Rescuing Fourth Brother is the important thing, I know."

Meng and a number of attendants covered the body of Zhou's son with shrouds and buried it beside the Manor while Zhou Qi wept bitterly, and Zhou stood tearfully by. The heroes paid their respects before the grave.

Chapter 3

Chen held the dagger in his hands and stood watching dumbly as Huo Qingtong caught up with the Muslim column and gradually faded towards the horizon. He was about to go and ask Lu Feiqing about his pupil when he noticed a horse galloping towards him fast. As it came closer, he was disappointed to find it was only Xin Yan returning on the white horse.

"Master!" he shouted excitedly. "Master Zhang Jin has a prisoner."

"Who is it?" Chen asked.

"I went to the old temple and found Master Zhang Jin arguing with a man who wanted to pass. The man saw the horse I was riding and began cursing me as a horse thief and struck out at me with his sword. Master Zhang Jin and I fought with him. His kung fu was really good. He fought the two of us single-handed until finally I picked up some stones and started throwing them at him, and Master Zhang Jin clubbed him on the thigh. It was only then that we managed to capture him."

Chen smiled. "What is his name? What was he doing?"

"We asked him but he wouldn't say. But Master Zhang Jin says he must be a member of the Han School of Luoyang because he was using Iron Pipa Hand Kung Fu."

Zhang Jin galloped up, dismounted and bowed before Chen, then pulled a man off the horse's saddle. He was tied hand and foot, but he stood haughtily, exuding an air of insolence.

"I understand you are a member of the Han School of Luoyang," Chen said. "What is your honourable name?"

The man said nothing.

"Xin Yan, undo this gentleman's bonds," Chen said.

Xin Yan drew his knife and cut the rope that bound the man's hands and legs then stood behind him, his knife at the ready.

"My friends have wronged you, but please do not be offended," Chen said. "Come into my tent and take a seat."

Chen and the man sat on the ground while the other heroes came in and stood behind Chen's back.

When he saw Luo Bing enter, the man's anger flared and he jumped up. "You stole my horse," he shouted, pointing at her.

"So it's Master Han," Luo Bing replied with a smile. "We exchanged horses and I compensated you with a gold ingot. You did very well out of the deal. What are you angry about?"

Chen asked what had happened, and Luo Bing recounted how she had taken the white horse. The others laughed as they listened.

"In that case, we will return the horse to you, Master Han," Chen said. "There is also no need to return the gold ingot. Consider it a token of our respect and as payment for the rental of your horse."

Han was about to reply when Luo Bing said: "Great Helmsman, this won't do. Do you know who he is? He's a Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency man." She pulled out Wang Weiyang's letter and handed it to him.

Chen's eyes flashed down the lines. "The great name of Wang Weiyang has been known to me for a long time, but regrettably I have never met him," he said. "You are a member of the Han School of Luoyang. What relation are you to Fifth Madame Han?"

"And what is your honourable surname and esteemed name, sir?" Han replied.

Chen smiled. "My surname is Chen, my given name, Jialuo."

Han stood up. "You...you are the son of Chief Minister Chen?" he asked in a quavering voice.

"This is the Great Helmsman of our Red Flower Society," one of the Twin Knights said.

Han slowly sat down again and began weighing up this young Great Helmsman.

"Someone in the underworld started the rumour that our society was connected with the death of one of your school's members," Chen said. "In fact, we know nothing of it. I dispatched one of our brothers to Luoyang to explain

the matter, but something came up and he was forced to postpone the trip. So your arrival could not have been better timed, Master Han. I don't know how this rumour started. Can you tell me?"

"You...you're really the son of Chief Minister Chen of Haining?" Han asked.

"Since you know my identity, there is no point in trying to deceive you," Chen replied.

"Your family announced a large reward for finding you after you left home," Han said. "It was said that you had joined the Red Flower Society and had gone to the Muslim border regions. My late comrade Jiao Wenqi was engaged by your family to look for you, but he mysteriously disappeared on the way. That was five years ago. Recently, someone found the Iron Plate and Pipa darts that Brother Jiao used in Shanxi province, and we now know for certain that he was murdered. No-one knows the exact circumstances of his death, but consider, sir: if it wasn't the Red Flower Society, then who did it?"

"I killed Jiao Wenqi," Lu Feiqing interrupted. "I am not a member of the Red Flower Society, so this matter has nothing to do with them."

The others were startled. Lu stood up and told the story of how Jiao had found him one night, how he fought one against three, and had been injured, but had still managed to kill them on the deserted hillside. The heroes listened and then cursed Jiao, saying he was shameless and deserved to die. Han's face darkened but he said nothing.

"If Master Han wishes to avenge his martial brother's death, there is no reason why he should not do so now," Lu said. He turned to Luo Bing. "Mistress Wen, return Master Han's weapon to him please."

Luo Bing pulled out the Iron Pipa and handed it to Lu.

"Since Jiao was commissioned by the Chen family to find their son, he should have stuck to his mission," Lu said. As he spoke, he absent-mindedly exercised his Inner Strength kung fu on the body of the hollow Iron Pipa, slowly flattening it. "What was he doing using their money to come and give me trouble? Even if we of the fighting community are not able to sacrifice ourselves to save our country from the Manchu barbarians, we should still fight for justice and against those who oppress the people."

His Inner Strength kung fu was extraordinary. His hands rolled the flattened iron plate round so that it was transformed into a tube, and then with a few squeezes, into an iron club.

"What I detest most are the Manchu court's Eagles' Claws and the bodyguard agency running dogs who use a small knowledge of the martial arts to assist the wicked with their evil deeds."

His voice suddenly hardened and he twisted the iron club into an iron ring.

As Lu talked, Han watched him twist and squeeze his school's famous weapon as if he were making noodles, and was both startled and afraid. He knew that Jiao's kung fu had been about the same standard as his own, and realised that fighting with this old man meant certain death.

Han's courage had already evaporated and he did not dare to challenge Lu. But although shocked and humbled, he did not wish to appear too cowardly.

"This affair of Jiao Wenqi in fact arose because of me," Chen said. "I will write a letter to my elder brother telling him that Master Jiao found me, but that I was not willing to return home; also, that on his way back, Master Jiao met with an accident and passed away. I will then ask my brother to pay the reward and compensation money to Master Jiao's family."

Han continued to hesitate, and Chen's eyebrows rose. "But if your heart is set upon revenge, then I will fight you myself."

Han shuddered. "I will do exactly as you say, sir," he replied.

"That's a good fellow," Chen said. "One has to be flexible."

He told Xin Yan to hand him his writing brush, instone, ink and writing paper, and using a vigorous calligraphic style, wrote out a letter which Han accepted.

"Master Wang asked me to help escort a cargo back to Beijing and then to escort some treasures the Emperor has presented to your honourable family down to the south. But faced with the extraordinary talents of you all, I would only make a fool of myself if I made further use of my own minor abilities in the martial arts. I will take my leave of you, sir."

"Did you say items belonging to my family, Master Han?"

"The bodyguard agency caller who brought me the letter said the Emperor is extremely generous towards your family. Every few months, he bestows an amount of precious stones and treasures, and there is now a large accumulation of these that must be sent south to your home. Your family asked us to escort them, but I would not dare to continue earning my daily rice in such a business. After I have made suitable arrangements for Brother Jiao's dependants, I will return home."

"It is good that you are willing to follow Master Lu's invaluable words of advice," Chen said. "In that case, I might as well make friends with you. Xin Yan, please bring in the other gentlemen from the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency."

Xin Yan went out and led in Lead Escort Qian and the others. Han and the escorts stared dumbly at each other.

"Master Han, please take these friends with you," said Chen. "But if we ever catch them again doing anything but good deeds, do not blame us if our hands are not stayed by mercy."

Chen did not again mention the return of the white horse, and Han did not dare to bring it up.

"We will leave first," Chen said. "I will ask all of you to rest here for a day before making a start."

The Red Flower Society heroes mounted their horses and started off, leaving the Agency men and the Yamen officers standing silently behind.

"Master Chen," Lu Feiqing said after they had travelled for a while. "My pupil will meet up with those bodyguard agency fellows before long. They have been humiliated and have no way to get their revenge, so they may cause trouble. I would like to stay behind and watch them for a while before following after you."

"Please do as you wish, Master Lu," Chen replied.

Lu saluted, then galloped off the way they had come. Chen realised as Lu disappeared that he had not asked him about his pupil.

'Scholar' Yu, under orders to investigate the whereabouts of Wen Tailai, made discreet enquiries along the road as he went. But he discovered no clues, and in less than a day arrived at Liangzhou, a prosperous busy city and one of the largest in Gansu province. He found a room in an inn, then went to a tavern and drank alone, bemoaning his fate. He thought of Luo Bing's voice and smile, and a tide of longing rose within him. He knew it was hopeless, and the more he drank, the more melancholy he became. He was just about to leave when two men came in. Yu knew he had seen one of them before and quickly turned his head away. He thought frantically and placed him as one of the Yamen officers he had fought at Iron Gall Manor. Luckily, the man and his companion paid no attention to him.

They chose a table near the window which happened to be just next to Yu's and sat down. Yu sat with his head on the table, pretending to be drunk.

The two men chatted for a while, then one said:

"Brother Rui, it's remarkable how you captured that fellow. I wonder what sort of reward the Emperor will give you?"

"I'm not concerned about the reward," Rui replied. "If we can get him to Hangzhou nice and safely, I'll be happy. When we left Beijing, there were eight of us bodyguards, and now I'm the only one left. It was that fight in Suzhou. I'm not selling myself short, but I still get the shivers just thinking about it."

"You're with Master Zhang now," the other said. "I'm sure nothing more will be wrong."

"That's true," Rui replied. "But it means that the Imperial Guardsmen get all the credit. What do we Imperial Bodyguards get out of it? But tell me, old Zhu. What are they doing sending him to Hangzhou instead of to Beijing?"

"My younger sister is from the family of Great Scholar Shi, as you know," Zhu replied, lowering his voice. "She told me quietly that the Emperor plans to go down south. Perhaps he wants to question him himself."

Rui grunted and drank a mouthful of wine. "So the six of you rushed out from Beijing to see that the Imperial command was complied with?"

"And to give the rest of you some help. The Red Flower Society is very powerful in the south. We have to be especially careful."

As he listened, Yu groaned inwardly at the sheer luck of it all. If he had not happened to be there and hear them, the Red Flower Society heroes would have been racing to Beijing to save Wen when he was really being taken to Hangzhou.

"Brother Rui," Zhu said. "Exactly what crime has this fellow committed that the Emperor wants to question him personally?"

"How would we know?" Rui replied. "We were just told that if we didn't catch him, we would all be removed from our posts. I just hope I can keep my head on my shoulders."

The two laughed and drank, and their conversation turned to the subject of women. Finally, they paid the bill and stood up to leave. Rui looked over at Yu prostrate on the table.

"Scholars," he said and laughed harshly. "Three cups of wine and they can't even walk."

Yu waited until they had gone, then hastily threw five silver coins onto the table and dashed out of the tavern. He spotted the men entering the city Yamen. He waited for a long time but didn't see them re-appear, and decided they must be lodging there.

He returned to his room and as soon as it was dark, he changed into a set of dark clothes, stuck his golden flute into his belt then ran over to the Yamen. Making his way round to the back, he clambered over the wall.

All was pitch black in the courtyard except for a shaft of light coming from a window in the eastern hall, and as he crept closer, he heard voices coming from inside. He wet the tip of his finger with a drop of saliva, then lightly moistened the window paper and made a small hole. Looking through, he started in fright.

The hall was full of people. Zhang Zhaozhong was seated in the middle with the bodyguards and Yamen officers on either side of him. A man standing with his back to Yu cursed angrily, and he knew from his voice that it was Wen Tailai.

"You can curse to your heart's content," a voice off to the side said darkly. "I may not be as proficient in the martial arts as you, but you will still get a taste of

my hand."

Yu was distressed. "They are going to humiliate Fourth Brother," he thought. "He is the person Fourth Sister respects and loves most. How can I allow him to be insulted by these villains?"

He saw a tall, thin middleaged man wearing a blue gown advancing on Wen with his hand raised. Just as the man was about to strike Wen, Yu inserted his flute through the hole in the window paper, and with a puff, shot a small arrow into the man's left eye.

The man fell to the ground in agony and there was a moment of confusion in the hall. Yu shot another arrow into the right cheek of one of the bodyguards, then kicked open the main door of the hall and ran straight in.

"Don't move!" he shouted. "The Red Flower Society has come to the rescue!"

He raised his flute and struck the Yamen officers beside Wen, then pulled a dagger from his legwrappings and cut the ropes binding Wen's hands and feet.

Zhang Zhaozhong thought a largescale attack was in progress and immediately drew his sword and went to the hall door to prevent Wen and Yu from escaping and those outside from getting in.

As soon as Wen's hands were free of the bonds, his spirits surged. An Imperial Bodyguard lunged towards him and Wen struck him hard with his fist, sending him reeling away. The others were so afraid of Wen's power that for a while they did not dare to get too close to him.

"Fourth Brother, let's get out!" Yu said.

"Are the others here?"

"No," Yu replied quietly. "There's only me."

Wen nodded once. The wounds on his right arm and thigh had not yet healed, but he ran for the door with his right arm resting on Yu's shoulder.

Zhang strode forward a step. "Stop!" he shouted, and jabbed at Wen's stomach with his long sword. Wen was slow on his feet, so using attack as his defence, he struck out at his opponent's eyes with the index and middle fingers of his left hand, and Zhang was forced to retract his sword.

"Good!" he exclaimed. The two men were incredibly fast, but Wen only had the use of his left arm and after a few more moves, Zhang hit his right shoulder. Unable to keep his balance, Wen sat down heavily on the floor.

"I shouldn't have done this," Yu thought as he fought off the Imperial Bodyguards. "I will save Fourth Brother and then let the Eagle's Claws kill me so that Fourth Sister will know that I, Yu Yutong, am not an unchivalrous oaf."

He saw Wen fall to the ground and flipped round to strike out desperately at Zhang.

"Fourth Brother, get out quick!" Yu shouted. Wen rested a moment and then with difficulty clambered to his feet. The golden flute flew and danced, completely neglecting to defend or parry. Yu was completely unconcerned about his own safety. Even with his superb swordsmanship, Zhang was forced to move back several paces in the face of his suicidal attack. Wen saw an opening and shot out of the door, with the mob of the bodyguards and officers howling after him.

Yu blocked them at the door, ignoring his own safety.

"Don't you want to live?" Zhang shouted. "Who taught you that kung fu style?" Yu was using the traditional style of the Wudang School, the school to which Zhang belonged, and Zhang had so far spared him because of it.

"It would be best if you killed me," Yu said, smiling sadly. After a few more moves, Zhang's sword struck him once more, this time on the right shoulder, so Yu shifted the golden flute to his left hand and continued the fight without retreating a step.

The mass of the bodyguards charged forward again and Yu's flute danced, hooting strangely as the wind whipped through it. A bodyguard chopped at him with his sword, and gashed Yu's shoulder. His body was now covered in blood, but he continued the fierce battle, and there was a sudden crack as the jawbone of another bodyguard was shattered. The bodyguards pressed forward, knives, swords, whips and clubs all thrusting towards Yu simultaneously. Yu's thigh was hit by a club and he fell to the ground. His golden flute kept up its dance for a few moments, then he fainted away.

There was a sudden shout from the door: "Stop!"

The bodyguards turned and saw Wen walking slowly back into the hall. He ignored them and went straight over to Yu. Seeing his bloodied body, he couldn't stop his tears. He bent down and was relieved to find Yu was still breathing.

"Treat his wounds quickly," he ordered.

The bodyguards were so fearful of his power, that they did as he said. Wen watched them bind Yu's wounds and carry him through to the inner hall, then placed both of his hands behind his back.

"Tie me up," he said. One of the bodyguards looked over at Zhang, then walked slowly over.

"What are you afraid of?" Wen asked. "If I was going to hurt you, I would have done so long ago."

The bodyguard bound his hands and took him back to the dungeons. Two bodyguards were left to guard him.

Early the next morning, Zhang went to see Yu and found him in a deep sleep. He was told by a guard that the doctor had visited Yu and prescribed some medicine. Zhang visited him again in the afternoon and Yu appeared to be more alert.

"Is your teacher surnamed Lu or Ma?" Zhang asked him.

"My teacher is surnamed Ma, his given name is Zhen."

"So that's it. I am your martial uncle, Zhang Zhaozhong."

Yu nodded slightly.

"Are you a member of the Red Flower Society?"

Yu nodded again.

"Such a nice young man," Zhang sighed. "What a pity that you have fallen to such a state. What relation is Wen Tailai to you? What were you doing risking your life to save him?"

Yu closed his eyes and was silent. A moment passed.

"In the end I did save him, so I can die in peace," he finally said.

"Huh! Do you really think you could snatch him away from me?"

Yu was startled. "Didn't he escape?" he asked.

"How could he? Stop day-dreaming!"

Zhang tried to interrogate him, but Yu took no notice, and after a while he began to sneeze.

Zhang smiled slightly. "You stubborn boy," he said, and left.

He ordered the Imperial Bodyguards to organise an ambush with Wen as bait. After dinner, Wen was brought out of the dungeon and interrogated once more, in the same manner as the night before when Yu had unexpectedly burst in and disrupted the proceedings. This time, however, heavily-armed troops were hidden all around the Yamen, waiting to catch any Red Flower Society rescuers. But they waited in vain.

The next morning, Zhang received a report that the waters of the Yellow River were rising rapidly, and that the current at the point where they intended to cross was very strong and ordered an immediate departure. He had Wen and Yu placed in separate carriages and was just about to start out when Officer Wu and the Zhen Yuan Agency Lead Escorts raced into the Yamen. Zhang hastily questioned them, and Officer Wu breathlessly told him how they had been attacked and captured by the Muslims and the Red Flower Society, and how Lead Escort Yan had been killed by a young Muslim girl.

"Brother Yan was a very tough fighter," Zhang said. "Extraordinary." He raised his hand. "We will meet again in Beijing."

Zhang immediately went and told the Liangzhou Military commander that he wanted four hundred crack troops transferred to his command to help escort criminals wanted by the Emperor. The commander did not dare refuse and also dispatched Colonel Cao Neng and Chief-of-Staff Ping Wangxian to lead the escorting soldiers until they reached Lanzhou, the provincial capital, where provincial troops would take over.

Zhang's column surged out of the town, stealing and pilfering from the common people in the usual way as they went.

They travelled without incident for two days. Then, about ten miles from a

village named Twin Wells, they came upon two bare-breasted men sitting beneath a tree by the side of the road with a pair of fine horses standing nearby. Two of the soldiers went over.

"Hey!" one shouted. "These two horses look like official horses. Where did you steal them from?"

"We are peaceful citizens," said one of the men. "We wouldn't dare to steal horses."

"We are tired of walking. Lend them to us," the second soldier replied.

The two men stood up, walked over to their horses and untied the reins.

The soldiers walked haughtily over and were just about to take hold of the reins when the two men kicked their behinds, leapt onto the horses and galloped over to one of the carriages.

"Is Fourth Brother in there?" one shouted.

"Ah, Twelfth Brother!" Wen answered.

"Fourth Brother, we're leaving," the man replied. "But don't worry, we'll be back to rescue you soon."

The two men galloped away before the carriage's guards could attack.

The column lodged that night at a town called Clear Water Shop. Early the following morning, while most of the soldiers were still asleep, a scream was heard, and there was a moment of confusion. The two troop commanders, Cao and Ping went to investigate and found the bodies of more than a dozen soldiers lying where they had slept, each with a gaping gash in the chest. There was no indication of who had killed them.

The next evening, they rested at Hengshi. This was a large town, and the column filled three inns and many private houses besides. During the night, one of the inns caught fire. Zhang ordered the bodyguards to guard Wen and to heed nothing else in order to avoid being tricked. The flames rose higher and higher.

"Bandits!" Cao Neng cried as he ran into Zhang's room. "They're attacking!"

"Please go and direct operations yourself, General Cao," Zhang replied. "I am unable to leave this place."

Cao nodded and left.

From outside the inn came the sound of screams and shrieks, galloping horses, the crackle of the flames and the smash of roof tiles as they hit the ground. Zhang ordered two bodyguards onto the roof to keep watch, but told them not to get involved unless the enemy attacked the inn. The fire did not get out of control, and before long it was extinguished. The agitated clamour continued for a while, then gradually died down to the point where the sound of hooves could be heard as horses galloped off eastwards.

Cao, his face covered in soot, grease and blood, ran in to see Zhang again.

"The bandits have retreated," he reported.

"How many of our men have been killed and wounded?" Zhang asked.

"I don't know yet. Several...several dozen."

"How many bandits were captured?"

Cao's mouth fell open. After a moment, he said: "None."

Zhang grunted.

"Their faces were covered with cloth, and their kung fu was horrendous," Cao added. "But it's very strange, they didn't steal anything. All they did was kill our brothers. Just before they left, they threw down two hundred taels of silver for the innkeeper saying it was compensation for starting the fire."

"So you think they were bandits, do you?" Zhang said. "Tell everyone to get some rest, General Cao. We will start out early tomorrow."

Cao retired and went to see the innkeeper, whom he accused of being in collusion with the bandits and responsible for the murder of the soldiers. The innkeeper kowtowed and begged for mercy and finally gave Cao the two hundred taels of silver.

The next day, the soldiers were busy until noon before finally making a start. They passed through beautiful country of blue hills and green water, surrounded by dense vegetation on all sides. After travelling for about four hours, the road began to grow gradually steeper and high peaks rose on either side.

A horse came galloping down the road towards them and halted about ten

paces in front of the column.

"Listen to me, all of you," the rider called out. "You have offended the demons. Turn back quickly and you will be spared. If you continue eastwards, each one of you Turtles will surely die."

The soldiers shuddered as they looked at the man. He was wearing clothes made of rough hemp bound at the waist with grass rope. His face was pale yellow and his eyebrows slanted upwards, just like the images of life-stealing spirits in the temples. The man spurred his horse forward and galloped down the mountain, passing beside of the column, and was gone. Suddenly, one of the soldiers in the rear-guard gave a cry, and fell to the ground, dead. The rest started in fright and gathered round to look, but there was no wound visible on his body. Terrified, they all began talking at once.

Cao Neng assigned two soldiers to stay behind and bury the dead man and the column continued up the mountain. Before they had gone very far, another horse approached them from in front, its rider the same man they had seen earlier.

"Listen to me, all of you," he called out. "You have offended the demons. Turn back quickly and you will be spared. If you continue eastwards, each one of you Turtles will surely die."

The soldiers wondered fearfully how the man could have made his way round in front of them again. They had clearly seen him go down the mountain and one glance confirmed that there were no short cuts back up the slope. The man spurred his horse forward and the soldiers shrunk from him as if he was a real demon.

One of the Imperial bodyguards, named Zhu, stuck out his sword to obstruct the man. "Slow down, friend," he said.

The man struck Zhu's shoulder with his right hand, and the sword clattered to the ground. Then he sped off down the mountain. As he passed the end of the column, the last soldier gave a shriek and fell to the ground, dead. The other soldiers stood staring foolishly, scared out of their wits.

Zhang went down to the end of the column to investigate.

"What is this fellow, a man or a ghost?" Zhu said. He pressed his wounded right shoulder, his face deathly pale. Zhang told him to undo his clothes and examined the large black swelling on his right shoulder. He ordered the troops to strip the dead soldier bare and examine him for wounds. When they turned him over, they found a similar black swelling on his back from which the shape of a hand could be vaguely discerned. The soldiers broke into an uproar as a shout of "The Demon's Mark!" "The Demon's Mark!" went up. Zhang ordered that two soldiers be left behind to bury the dead man. Two were chosen from the ranks, but even when threatened with death, they refused to carry out the order. Zhang had no alternative but to order a halt and wait until the body was buried before continuing.

"Master Zhang, this fellow is very strange," said Bodyguard Rui. "How could he pass us by and then make his way back in front of us again?"

Zhang stood deep in thought for a while. "Brother Zhu and the two soldiers were obviously victims of Black Sand Palm Kung Fu," he said. "There are very few masters of Black Sand Palm kung fu in the underworld."

"If it's Black Palm kung fu, then the best is naturally the Taoist Priest Hui Lu, but he's been dead for many years," Rui said. "Could it be that his spirit has reappeared?"

Zhang slapped his thigh. "That's it! That's it!" he cried. "They're Hui Lu's pupils. The Twin Knights that people call Black Death and White Death. I was trying to think of one person, so I couldn't work it out. All right, so we're up against them as well."

He had no way of knowing that the Chang brothers were also members of the Red Flower Society.

That night, the column stayed at Black Pine Village. Cao posted guards all around the village to keep careful watch, but next morning, not one of the soldiers on guard duty returned to report, and a detail sent to investigate found them all dead with a string of paper money tied round each of their necks. The rest of the soldiers were terrified, and more than a dozen immediately deserted, slipping stealthily away.

They had to cross Black Scabbard Mountain, one of the most precipitous spots

on the Liangzhou road. The air became colder and colder as the road grew steeper, and despite the fact that it was only September, snow flakes floated down around them. The road deteriorated to the point where there was a steep mountain face on one side and a sheer cliff on the other falling into a deep ravine. The soldiers moved slowly hand-in-hand, terrified of slipping on the snow. Several of the bodyguards dismounted and helped to support Wen's carriage.

Just as they were gingerly making their way forward, they heard a chirping sound coming from in front. A moment later, the sound turned into an unearthly howl, tragic and harsh, which echoed through the ravine causing everyone's hair to stand on end. The soldiers all stopped in their tracks.

Then came a shout: "Those who continue will meet the King of Hell -- Those who turn back will survive."

How could the soldiers dare to continue?

A man appeared around a curve in the road ahead. "Those who continue will meet the King of Hell, those who turn back will survive," he intoned in a deep voice.

The soldiers recognised him as the demon that had appeared twice the day before and had killed with just a wave of his hand, and they turned and fled with squeals of fear. Cao Neng shouted to them to halt, but he had to raise his sword and slay one of the soldiers before some of them steadied. But sixty or seventy had disappeared.

"Guard the carriage," Zhang said to Rui. "I'll go and talk to these two." He leapt passed the soldiers. "Could that be the Twin Knights up ahead?" he asked in a loud, clear voice. "I, Zhang Zhaozhong, greet you. There is no enmity between us. Why are you playing this game?"

The man in front laughed coldly. "Ha! So, the Twin Demons meet the Fire Hand Judge," he said. He strode over and struck out at Zhang with such power that his hand made a whistling sound as it cut through the air.

The road at that point was extremely narrow and Zhang was unable to dodge to either left or right, so he countered the blow with his left hand, putting all of his Inner Strength behind it, while also attacking with his right palm. His

opponent parried with his left hand. Their four hands met, and they stood almost motionless for a while as they tested each other. Suddenly, Zhang swept his left leg cross-wise in the 'Level Clouds Slicing The Peak' style. With insufficient time to evade the blow, the man brought his hands together and drove them viciously at Zhang's temples. Zhang leant to one side and hastily withdrew his leg, then moved forward, and with the precipice at their side, the two passed each other by. They had exchanged positions.

Zhang suddenly became aware of someone attacking him from behind. He dodged out of the way and saw his assailant was another pale, skeleton-like figure, his face exactly the same as the first.

Zhang had more than two hundred soldiers and bodyguards with him, but they were powerless to assist because of the narrowness of the mountain path beside the ravine.

The three fought more and more fiercely. In the midst of the battle, one of the Twin Knights hit the rock-face by mistake and a small avalanche of gravel rattled down off the precipice followed by a slab of rock which plunged into the ravine. A long time passed before they finally heard the distant crash as it hit the ground.

The battle continued for a long time. Suddenly, one of the twins struck out with his fist, forcing Zhang to move to one side to avoid it. The other twin then leapt over and occupied Zhang's former position beside the stone-face and both attacked him at the same moment, attempting to force him into the ravine.

Zhang saw one of his attacker's legs sweeping forward and stepped back a pace, so that half of his foot was over the edge of the precipice. A cry of fright went up from the troops. Then, Zhang felt a gust of wind as the other twin's fist swung towards his face. Zhang was unable to retreat, and knowing that there would be great strength behind the blow, was also unable to counter it. If he did, his opponent would simply be thrown back against the stone-face by the force of the collision while he himself would certainly fall to his death. So, with wisdom born of fear, he seized hold of his attacker's wrist, and with a great shout threw him into the ravine.

His body in mid-air, 'Black Death' stayed calm. He drew in his legs and

performed a somersault in order to slow down the force of his fall. Half way through the circle, he pulled a Flying Claw grapple from his belt and threw it straight up. His brother 'White Death' had also taken out his Flying Claw and the two grapples locked tightly, almost as if they were shaking hands. 'White Death' jerked at the rope before the full force of his brother's fall returned, and swung him up and over bringing him back to earth more than a hundred feet along the mountain path.

'White Death' saluted Zhang with his fists. "Your kung fu is very powerful. We are impressed," he said. Then, without even bending down to concentrate his strength, he sprang into the air, and landed several dozen feet further away. He grabbed hold of his brother's hand and the two disappeared round the bend.

The soldiers clustered round, some praising Zhang's kung fu, others lamenting that 'Black Death' had not fallen to his death. Zhang said not a word, but leaned against the rock face and slowly sat down. He looked at his wrist and saw the jet-black impression of five fingers on his flesh as if he had been branded, and was struck by a wave of terror.

The column crossed Black Scabbard mountain, and that night another thirty or forty soldiers deserted. Zhang discussed the situation with Rui and the other bodyguards.

"These fellows are not going to give up even though this is the main road to Lanzhou, the provincial capital," he said. "There's going to be a lot more trouble ahead, so we had better make our way round by the backroads, and cross the river at Crimson Bend."

Cao Neng had been looking forward to getting to Lanzhou so that he could transfer his burden to other shoulders, and was very unhappy with Zhang's plan. But he did not dare to disagree.

"We have lost many soldiers on the road," Zhang said. "When you get back, Master Cao, you can report that they were killed during an attack on bandits, and died courageously for their country. I will write out a note to that effect in a moment."

Cao Neng's spirits rose again. According to the military regulations, if a soldier

was killed in action, it was possible to obtain a pension, and the money naturally fell into the pocket of the officer in command.

They heard the roar of the Yellow River long before it came into view, and travelled more than half a day further before arriving at the Crimson Bend crossing. At this bend on the Yellow River, the rocks along the banks are blood-red, hence its name. Dusk was already approaching, but through the evening mists, they could see the fury with which the Yellow River surged eastwards, its muddy waters bubbling and boiling against the banks.

"We will cross the river tonight," Zhang said. "The water is dangerous but if we delay, there may be trouble."

With the river running so fast, the crossing could only be made by sheepskin rafts. Soldiers were sent out to search for rafts, but they could not find any. Darkness fell. Zhang was just becoming anxious when he spotted two sheepskin rafts shooting down the river towards them. The soldiers shouted, and the two rafts edged towards the bank.

"Hey, boatman!" Cao shouted. "Ferry us across and we'll pay you well."

The big man on the raft stood up and waved his hand.

"You're a mute," said Cao.

"Damn your ancestors," replied the man in Cantonese. "If you're coming then come, if you're not, then don't. You bunch of bastards. It's a waste of time dealing with you." Cao and the others understood not a word of it. Cao ignored him and invited Zhang and the bodyguards escorting Wen to get onto the rafts first.

Zhang weighed up the boatman. His wide-brimmed hat hid half his face and it was impossible to distinguish his features clearly. But the muscles on his arms were bunched and bulging, revealing great strength, while the oar in his hands was of a very dark colour and appeared to be made of something other than wood. He felt something was wrong, and not being able to swim, he could not afford to fall victim to some trick.

"Master Cao," he said. "You go first with some of the soldiers."

Cao ordered some of the soldiers onto the two rafts. The current was rapid,

but the two boatmen were highly skilled and safely delivered the government troops to the opposite bank, and then returned to take on another batch.

Cao boarded a raft with another group of soldiers, but just as they left the bank, a long whistle sounded behind them which was answered by a host of other whistles.

Zhang hastily ordered the troops to surround the carriage and guard it closely. A crescent moon hung low in the sky. Under its light, he saw about a dozen horses coming towards them. He galloped forward. "What's going on?" he shouted.

The riders formed a single rank as they approached, then one in the middle spurred his horse on and rode ahead of the others. In his hand he held a white folding fan with which he fanned himself. "Is that the 'Fire Hand Judge' Zhang Zhaozhong?" he asked.

"It is," Zhang replied. "And who are you, sir?"

The other laughed. "We thank you for escorting our Brother Wen this far, but we would not want to trouble you further."

"Are you Red Flower Society people?"

"Everyone praises the 'Fire Hand Judge' for his superlative mastery of the martial arts, but he obviously has divine foresight as well," the man replied, smiling. "You are correct. We are Red Flower Society people." He gave a long whistle.

Zhang started slightly as he heard the two boatmen on the rafts give answering whistles.

Cao, seated on one of the rafts, saw the enemy approaching on the shore, and his face turned the colour of mud. The boatman stopped the raft in midstream with a stroke of his oar.

"Thirteenth Brother!" Cao heard a crisp voice call from the other raft. "Ready when you are."

"Right!" the boatman replied. Cao raised his spear and thrust it at him, but the boatman deflected it deftly with his oar and then knocked Cao and all the other

soldiers on board into the river. Both boatmen then rowed back close to the shore.

Zhang was thankful for his caution. "You have been killing government troops the whole way," he shouted. "You have committed many unpardonable acts. What is your position in the Red Flower Society, sir?"

"There is no need for you to ask my name," Great Helmsman Chen said. "Xin Yan, give me my weapons."

Xin Yan opened his bag and placed two weapons in Chen's hands. Normally, the other heroes should have fought first, but Chen was unable to resist the opportunity to demonstrate his skills.

Zhang jumped off his horse and strode forward. But just as he was preparing himself for the fight, Imperial Bodyguard Zhu ran up behind him and said: "Master Zhang, let me deal with him."

Zhang decided to let him test out the enemy first. "Be careful, Brother Zhu," he said.

Zhu lunged forward, sword raised. He chopped out at Chen's thigh. Chen jumped lightly off his horse and lifted the shield in his left hand to parry the blow. In the moonlight, Zhu saw that nine glistening, sharp hooks protruded from the face of the shield, and knew that if his sword collided with them, it would be caught in their grasp. He started in fright and hastily withdrew his sword. Chen then flourished the weapon in his right hand: five cords, each one tipped with a steel ball especially designed for hitting the Yuedao points on the human body. Terrified by the ferocious nature of this weapon, Zhu leapt backwards, but the cords circled round behind him, and he felt a sudden numbness on his back. Then the cords entwined his legs and with a tug, Chen pulled Zhu off his feet, swung him round and round, and sent him flying straight towards a rocky outcrop nearby.

If he had hit it, he would have been smashed to pieces. But Zhang, seeing that Zhu was completely out-classed, raced over, grabbed his queue and pulled him down just in front of the rock face.

"Rest for a while, Brother Zhu," he said. Frozen with fear, Zhu was unable to answer.

Zhang raised his precious 'Frozen Emerald' Sword and leapt in front of Chen.

Zhang thrust his sword at Chen's right shoulder. Chen flipped the chords towards the blade, while the shield in his left hand struck out at Zhang.

As they battled, the two boatmen, 'Crocodile' Jiang and Luo Bing, jumped ashore and ran towards the carriages, guarded by the soldiers. Jiang charged straight into the ranks, immediately killing two of the closest soldiers. The others frantically gave way. Luo Bing charged over to one of the carriages, and lifted up the carriage curtain.

"Fourth Brother, are you in there?" she called. But it was 'Scholar' Yu, still seriously wounded. Suddenly hearing Luo Bing's voice through his stupor, he could only think that it was a dream, or that he had died and was meeting her in the other world.

"You've come!" he cried happily.

Luo Bing knew that the voice was not her husband's and ran to the next carriage. But before she could pull aside the curtain, a saw-toothed sword chopped at her from the right. She parried with her sword, and looking up at her attacker in the watery moonlight, recognised him as one of the eight bodyguards who had attacked Wen and herself in Suzhou. With a surge of hatred, she redoubled her attack. Rui was aware of her ability with throwing knives and speeded up his strokes to avoid giving her an opportunity to use them. Then two other bodyguards joined the battle while the soldiers closed in from all sides.

Four more of the heroes led by 'Leopard' Wei galloped towards her through a hail of arrows. One arrow planted itself in the neck of Wei's horse, and the pain made it gallop even more furiously. The animal's hooves hit the chest of one of the soldiers, Wei flew off the horse with his hooks raised, and amid a chorus of screams, gouged them into the breasts of two other soldiers. Wei then aimed the hooks at Bodyguard Rui who was forced to abandon his attack on Luo Bing. 'Hunchback' Zhang Jin and the others also raced up and the soldiers scattered.

Free once more, Luo Bing threw herself into the carriage and hugged Wen's neck, then burst into tears.

After a while, Zhang Jin stuck his head in through the carriage curtain.

"Fourth Brother," he grinned. "We've come to take you back."

He climbed onto the driver's seat and the carriage moved off northwards away from the river, and stopped by the side of a mound, from which they could get a good view of the battle.

Suddenly, Zhang broke away from his duel with Chen and ran for Wen's carriage.

Luo Bing saw him coming and brandished her sword at him. But Zhang's sword was extraordinarily tough, and as they clashed with a 'clang', it snapped her blade in two. With the rest of his strength, Zhang leapt up into the carriage and pulled Luo Bing in with him. Greatly frightened, the other heroes raced up to save her, and Zhang lifted her up and threw her at them. The Twin Knights raced over and caught her.

Meanwhile, Zhang turned and grabbed Wen, and pulled him to the carriage door. "Wen Tailai is here," he shouted. "If anyone dares to come any closer, I'll kill him!"

The cold gleam of Zhang's 'Frozen Emerald' sword was poised at Wen's neck.

"Fourth Brother," Luo Bing wailed, and tried to throw herself at the carriage, but Lu Feiqing held her back and took a step forward himself.

Zhang!" he called out. "Can you see who I am?" Zhang and he had not seen each other for a long time and it was difficult to see clearly in the moonlight, so Lu drew his White Dragon sword, took hold of the tip of the blade, and bent the handle back so that it formed a circle. Then he let the tip go and the blade bounced back upright and swayed slightly.

Zhang grunted. "Ah, so it's Brother Lu," he said. "Why have you come looking for me?"

"You are wounded," Lu replied. "All the heroes of the Red Flower Society are here as well as 'Iron Gall' Zhou Zhongying. It is going to be hard for you to escape today with your life. But in memory of our benevolent teacher, I will give you a way out."

Zhang grunted again, but said nothing.

Suddenly they heard shouts and cries drifting over from the east, as if a thousand armies were racing towards them. The heroes were filled with apprehension, but Zhang was even more worried.

"This Red Flower Society is truly resourceful," he thought. "Even here in the northwest, they can still call up huge reinforcements."

"Release Master Wen," Lu Feiqing continued, "and I will ask the heroes, out of respect for me, to release you. But there is one thing you must swear to."

Zhang eyed the strong enemies surrounding him. "What?" he said.

"You must swear that you will immediately retire from public life and no longer be a running dog of the Manchus."

Zhang had pursued glory and wealth with fervour and he had risen in rank as fast as though swept upwards up by a whirlwind. Wanting him to give up his position was just the same as wanting his life. He released Wen from his grip, pulled at the mule's reins, and the carriage charged forward.

The heroes held back afraid of risking Wen's life, but Luo Bing could not stand it. "Release him and we'll let you go without having to swear to anything," she called desperately.

Zhang took no notice and drove the carriage on towards the ranks of Manchu troops, who had by now regrouped.

Bodyguard Rui saw Zhang approaching and ordered the soldiers to fix arrows in their bows in readiness. The roar of the approaching column was getting louder and both Red Flower Society and the soldiers were afraid that they were reinforcements for the other side.

"Brother Wei, take three others and scatter the Eagle's Claws," Chen shouted.

Wei and the others raised their weapons and charged into the Manchu ranks, slaughtering as they went.

A youngster darted out from behind Lu Feiqing saying: "I'm going too!" Chen frowned: it was Li Yuanzhi, once more dressed in boy's clothes.

When Lu met up with her again after the battle, Yuanzhi had insisted that he take her with him to help rescue Wen. Lu finally agreed, but made her promise

that she would do as she was told. Yuanzhi then wrote a letter to her mother in which she said she had decided to go on ahead alone to see her father in Hangzhou.

Chen quickly issued his instructions, and 'Buddha' Zhao raced after the carriage and sent two sleeve arrows flying into the eyes of the mule pulling it along. The mule gave a long scream and reared up on its hind legs. The Twin Knights charged to either side of the carriage and flung their Flying Claws at Zhang, who fended them off with his sword. Simultaneously, Priest Wu Chen and Xu attacked Zhang's back.

"Now!" Chen shouted to Xin Yan. The two soared through the air and landed on top of the carriage.

Zhang heard Chen and Xin Yan land above and behind him and threw a handful of Golden Needles at them.

Chen saw the movement, and pushed Xin Yan off the carriage and placed the shield in front of his own body. There was a patter of metallic noises as the needles hit it, but despite the extraordinary speed of his reflexes, he heard Xin Yan cry out. Knowing the boy had been hit, Chen hastily leapt down to help him. Zhang threw another handful of the needles at Priest Wu Chen and Xu. The Priest flew out of the back of the carriage like an arrow, moving faster and further than the needles. Xu, however, only had time to lift a cotton coverlet in the carriage to block the needles. But his left shoulder was left exposed and with a sudden feeling of numbness, he fell out of the carriage.

Zhang Jin raced over to help him. "Brother Xu, are you all right?" he shouted, bending over. Suddenly he felt a great pain in his back as he was hit by an arrow, and stumbled.

"Brothers! Everyone regroup!" Chen shouted. Arrows were flying towards them like thick clouds of locusts. Zhang Jin put his left hand on Priest Wu Chen's shoulder and hit out at the arrows with his wolf's tooth club.

"Tenth Brother, don't move!" the Priest said. "Control yourself." He stopped the flow of blood from Zhang Jin's wound with a touch to the artery and carefully pulled the arrow out. Then he ripped a corner off his robes and bound up the wound.

Then they saw a pitch-black mass of Manchu soldiers surging towards them from the east.

Zhang was ecstatic at the sight of reinforcements arriving, but his breathing was becoming difficult and he knew that his injuries were serious. Chen and the others attacked the carriage once more, and he lifted up Wen's body, and swung it round and round as a detachment of cavalry charged towards the Red Flower Society fighters with sabres raised. Chen could see that Wen would certainly be killed if they attempted to recapture him by force, so he gave a loud whistle and raced behind a nearby mound with the others following.

Chen conducted a head-count, and found that Xu, Zhou Qi, Yuanzhi, Lord Zhou and Meng were missing.

"Has anyone seen Brother Xu and Lord Zhou?" Chen asked.

Zhang Jin, who was lying on the ground, raised his head and said: "Seventh Brother was injured. Isn't he here? I'll go and find him."

He stood up, but the arrow wound on his back was too serious, and he swayed unsteadily.

"Don't you move, Tenth Brother," said 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi. "I'll go."

"I'll go too," added 'Crocodile' Jiang, but Chen held him back. "You and Fourth Sister make your way to the river bank and prepare the rafts," he said. Jiang and Luo Bing, her hopes dashed again, left.

Shi leapt onto a horse and galloped off around the mound with sword in hand. By this time, the Manchu troops were everywhere. Shi rode up onto higher ground and looked around, but could see no sign of Xu and the others, so he rode into the enemy's ranks to search for them.

Not long after, Lord Zhou and Meng appeared.

"Have you seen your daughter?" Chen asked. Zhou shook his head, full of anxiety.

"My young pupil has disappeared too," Lu Feiqing said. "I'll go and look for them."

As he rode out, the ranks of the Manchu troops suddenly parted and several

horses charged towards him. In the lead was Priest Wu Chen dragging Wei along with his hand. Lu started in surprise when he saw Wei, his whole body covered in blood and dirt, and immediately moved forward to obstruct any pursuers. But the Manchu troops did not dare to obstruct these ferocious-looking men and let them retreat behind the mound.

Chen quickly went to see Wei, who was delirious, shouting: "Kill the bastards!"

"Ninth Brother has worn himself out with all this killing," Priest Wu Chen said. "His mind is a little confused. Nothing serious."

"Have you seen Brother Xu and Brother Shi?" Chen asked.

"I'll go and look for them" the Priest said.

"There's also Mistress Zhou and the Master Lu's pupil," Chen said.

Priest Wu Chen mounted up, sword at the ready, and charged back into the Manchu ranks. A Manchu officer spurred his horse forward and charged at him with spear raised, but the priest dodged the spear thrust and drove his sword into the officer's heart. The officer slumped off his horse and the soldiers under his command howled and scattered in all directions. Priest Wu Chen continued his onslaught and soldiers fell wherever his sword went. As he galloped along a stretch of the road, he saw a crowd of soldiers with 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi in the middle fighting fiercely with three officers.

"Get away, I'll cover you!" Priest Wu Chen shouted.

The two raced back to the mound, but there was still no indication of what had happened to Xu and the others. A Manchu company commander led his soldiers in an attack on the mound occupied by the Red Flower Society, but the heroes immediately killed more than a dozen of them, and the rest retreated.

Chen led his horse up onto the mound. "Brother Meng," he said, handing him the reins. "Hold it steady and make sure it doesn't get hit by a stray arrow." He leapt up onto the horse's back and stood on the saddle. Looking around, he saw the huge Manchu column surging towards them from the east. A bugle sounded and the column turned into a fiery dragon as each soldier raised a torch. Amidst the glow, he saw a large banner flowing in the wind on which he could just

made out the words "Border Pacification General Zhao" written in large characters. Each soldier in the column was riding a tall, sturdy horse, and there was a clanking noise as they marched, indicating they were probably wearing armour.

Chen jumped down from the horse. "Armoured troops on the way," he shouted. "Everyone head for the river."

Lord Zhou was very worried about his daughter, but finding her among such a huge body of troops was impossible. The heroes helped up Wei, Zhang Jin and the other wounded, and galloped towards the banks of the Yellow River with the Manchu cavalry in hot pursuit. Luo Bing and Jiang punted the sheepskin rafts up to the shore and took the wounded on board first.

Everyone get on the rafts quickly!" Chen yelled. "Priest Wu Chen, Third Brother, Lord Zhou, we four will hold..."

Before he could finish, a wave of crossbow arrows flew towards them.

"Charge!" roared Priest Wu Chen, and the four threw themselves at the first ranks of cavalry. Lord Zhou's huge sword rose and fell, cutting Manchu soldiers down from their horses, while 'Buddha' Zhao slung copper coins at the eye-slits in their armour. Although it was impossible to see clearly in the dark, he still managed to blind five or six men. By this time, everyone except Chen and the other three had boarded the rafts.

Chen spotted a mounted officer directing the troops, and sprang over to him. He pulled the officer from his horse and ran for the river bank with him under his arm. The Manchu troops rushed forward to try to save their commanding officer, but they didn't dare to fire any arrows. Chen leapt onto one of the rafts and Jiang and Luo Bing began to move them out towards the centre of the river.

The Yellow River was in full flood and with the current powerful and turbulent, the two large sheepskin rafts flew off downstream. The hubbub of the great armed column slowly faded as the river roared around them.

The heroes set about tending to the wounded. 'Leopard' Wei's mind gradually cleared and his body was found to be free from wounds. 'Buddha' Zhao was an expert at medical treatment as well as with darts and he bound up 'Iron Pagoda' Yang's and Zhang Jin's wounds. Zhang Jin was more seriously injured, but was

in no danger. Xin Yan had been hit by several Golden Needles, and was in such pain that he cried out continually. The needles had penetrated right through the flesh into the bones, and Zhao took a magnet from his medicine bag and drew them out one by one. Luo Bing rowed on silently. Not only had they failed to rescue Wen, but 'Mastermind' Xu, Zhou Qi, Lu Feiqing and his pupil had been lost as well, and no-one knew where 'Scholar' Yu had got to.

Chen roused the captured Manchu officer. "What the hell was your column doing travelling through the night like that?" he asked.

The officer said nothing. Yang slapped him on the face. "Are you going to talk?" he shouted.

"I'll talk...I'll talk," the officer said quickly, holding his cheek. "What do you want me to say?"

"What was your column doing travelling at night?"

"General Zhao Wei received an Imperial command ordering us to attack the Muslim areas and take them over before a certain date. He was afraid we wouldn't make it in the time limit, and also that the Muslims would hear of our approach and make preparations. So we've been marching day and night."

"The Muslims are very well-behaved," said Chen. "Why are you going to attack them?"

"That...that, I don't know." the officer said.

"If you are heading for the Muslim areas, why did you come to interfere in our business?"

"General Zhao heard of some bandits making trouble in this area and ordered me to lead a detail to deal with them, but the main army didn't stop..."

Before he could finish, Yang gave him another slap. "Damn your mother!" he shouted. "It's you who are the bandits!"

"Yes, yes! I made a mistake!" the officer cried.

Chen was silent for a while, then questioned the officer closely regarding the army's troop strength, route and rations. Some of it the officer didn't know, but he did not dare to hide what he did know.

"Head...For...The...Shore" Chen shouted at the top of his voice. Luo Bing and Jiang steered the rafts towards the bank and everyone stepped ashore.

Chen called the Twin Knights over.

"Travel back as fast as you can and find out what happened to the others," he said. "If they have fallen into the hands of the Manchus, they will certainly be taken back to Beijing along the Great Road. We can intercept them further east and work out some way of rescuing them."

The Twin Knights nodded and started out.

"Twelfth Brother," Chen continued, turning to 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi. "I want you to do something for me."

"Whatever you say, Great Helmsman."

Chen wrote out a letter under the light of the moon.

"Please take this letter to Master Muzhuolun in the Muslim regions," he said. "We have only met him and his people once, but they showed the greatest friendship towards us, so we cannot stand idly by. Fourth Sister, please lend your white horse to Twelfth Brother for the trip." Luo Bing had kept the animal aboard the raft throughout the battle.

Shi mounted up and disappeared in a cloud of dust. With the horse's phenomenal speed, he estimated he could overtake the army in a day and be in time to warn Muzhuolun.

Chen then directed Jiang to tie the officer's hands behind his back. They placed him on one of the rafts and pushed it out into the stream and left it for Fate to decide whether he should live or die.

Chapter 4

In less than a day, the heroes arrived in Xuzhou. The local Red Flower Society Chief was immediately rushed off his feet making arrangements for them. After a night's rest, they continued on south. Every place they passed through now, big and small, had a Red Flower Society branch, but the heroes maintained their anonymity and sped onwards. They reached Hangzhou several days later and took up residence in the home of the Hangzhou Helmsman, Ma Shanjun. Ma's residence lay at the foot of Lonely Mountain beside the West Lake.

Ma was a merchant who owned two large silk factories. About fifty years old and portly, Ma, in his flowered silk robe and black woollen jacket, was the picture of a wealthy man used to luxury. But the appearance was deceptive: he was also a brave fighter. That night at a welcoming banquet in the rear hall, the heroes told him of their plan to rescue Wen Tailai.

"I will immediately dispatch men to find out which prison Master Wen is in, and then we can decide on a plan of action." He ordered his son Ma Dating to send someone to investigate.

The next morning, the son reported that his men had discreetly asked about Wen at all the prisons and military headquarters in the area, but had failed to find any trace of him.

Chen called a meeting of the heroes to discuss the situation.

"We have brothers in all the Yamens and in the military headquarters," said Ma. "If Master Wen was in an official prison, we would know about it. I am afraid the authorities are guarding him secretly."

"Our first step is to find out where Brother Wen is," said Chen. "Please continue to dispatch capable men around all the Yamens, Brother Ma. This evening, I will ask Priest Wu Chen and the Twin Knights to go to the Commander-in-chief's Yamen to see what they can find out. It is important that we don't alert the Manchus to what we are doing so whatever happens, there must be no fighting."

Priest Wu Chen and the Twin Knights set out at midnight and returned four

hours later to report that the Yamen was tightly guarded with at least a thousand soldiers with torches on guard duty. Several of the officers on patrol were second and third level Mandarins wearing red caps. The three had waited a long time, but the troops did not drop their vigilance in the slightest and they had no option but to return.

"The patrols have been particularly strict around Hangzhou over the past few days," Ma said. "Yamen officers have visited every gambling den and every brothel, and many people have been seized for no reason at all. Could it have something to do with Master Wen?"

"I don't think so," replied Xu. "The local people must be making an extra effort to impress some high officials visiting from Beijing.

"I haven't heard of any high officials coming here," Ma said.

The next day, Zhou Qi asked her parents to take her to see the famous West Lake. Lord Zhou agreed and asked Xu to accompany them. Xu had lost his parents when he was very young and had been alone ever since. To be suddenly treated as a son by Lord Zhou and his wife and to have such a lovely fiancée moved him greatly. He was very happy, and the brothers were happy for him.

Great Hellsman Chen also went to the lake for a stroll with Xin Yan. They walked for a while, then sat alone on a bridge and gazed at the depths of the lake and the mountains. The forests of bamboo and wood on the hillsides were dark and dense, a myriad leaves glistening brightly. The air was moist and hazy and the beautiful mountain peaks were wreathed in clouds. Chen had been to the West Lake several times in his youth, but had been unable, then, to appreciate its beauty.

As he gazed out at the scene, he spotted a carriage heading towards the Hidden Spirit Temple on Flying Peak, five hundred feet above them.

"Let's go up there," he said to Xin Yan. There was no road straight up to the peak, but the Lightness Kung Fu of both was excellent and they reached the top quickly. They gazed up at the sky, enjoying the peace and seclusion of the forest.

Suddenly, they saw two large men wearing blue gowns walking towards them. The two weighed up Chen and Xin Yan as they passed, expressions of surprise on their faces.

"Master, they're Kung fu experts," Xin Yan whispered. Two more men appeared walking towards them dressed exactly the same. They were discussing the scenery, and from their accents, it appeared they were Manchus. All the way along the path, they kept passing the blue-gowned fighters, perhaps thirty or forty in all, who all looked surprised when they saw Chen.

Xin Yan was dizzy at the sight of so many obviously top-ranking fighters. Chen was curious.

"Could it be that some secret society or martial arts school is holding a meeting here?" he thought. "But Hangzhou is Red Flower Society territory. If there was something of that sort, we would surely have been informed. I wonder why they all look so surprised when they see me?"

They rounded a bend and the sound of a lute accompanied by a chanting voice and the soft tinkle of a waterfall drifted across towards them. The voice recited:

"All is peace throughout heaven and earth,
Politics unsullied.
Fortunes and good fortune mount over four reigns.
The people wait to greet the Emperor
The banners of prosperity and wine fly in every village.
As the Imperial attendants appear."

They strolled across in the direction of the music, and saw a man dressed in the manner of a noble seated on a rock playing the lute. He was aged about forty. Two strong fighters and one stooped old man, all wearing blue gowns, stood beside him.

Chen suddenly shivered. He was struck with a vague feeling of recognition as he looked at the lute player. The man had an aristocratic bearing, and the more Chen looked at him, the more he seemed familiar.

The group eyed Chen and Xin Yan warily. The lute-player's fingers performed a final swirl over the strings and the lute was silent.

Chen saluted with his fists. "I could not help overhearing the song you just played, sir," he said. "I have never heard it before. Did you write it yourself?"

The man smiled. "Yes. It is a recent composition of mine. Since you are a music lover, I would be grateful of your opinion."

"Excellent, excellent," said Chen. "I especially liked the phrase 'The banners of prosperity and wine fly in every village.'"

An expression of delight appeared on the man's face. "So you remember the words. Please come over here and sit down, sir."

Chen refrained from adding that he disapproved of the way the song flattered the Emperor. He walked over, bowed and sat down.

The man studied Chen carefully and with curiosity.

"While coming up to the peak, we met a large number of other strollers all of whom looked surprised when they saw me," said Chen. "You now look at me in the same way. Is there something strange about my face?"

The man laughed. "You wouldn't know," he said. "I have a friend who bears a remarkable resemblance to you. The people you met on the path are also my friends, so they were naturally puzzled."

"So that's it," Chen smiled. "I also find your face very familiar, as if we had met before, but I can't remember when. I wonder if you can?"

The man laughed again. "Well that really is strange," he said. "What is your honourable name, sir?"

"Lu Jiachen. And you, sir?"

The man thought for a moment. "My name is Dongfeng. I am from Hebei Province. From your accent, I would guess you are from around here."

"That is correct," said Chen.

"I had long heard that the scenic beauty of the south was incomparable," continued the man who called himself Master Dongfang. "I can see today that it is true. Not only is the scenery superb, but the area is also obviously blessed with much talent."

Chen could tell from his speech that this was no ordinary man. He watched the reverential way in which the old man and the other two attendants treated him, and wondered just who he was.

"Someone with such outstanding knowledge of music as yourself must certainly be a virtuoso," Dongfang said. "Why not play a song for us?" He pushed the seven-stringed lute in front of Chen.

Chen stretched out his hand and lightly strummed the strings and found the lute's tone to be matchlessly crisp and clear. It looked like an antique of great age.

"I am not worthy of playing such an instrument," he said. He checked the tuning, then struck up a tune, named 'The Goose Lands on the Flat Sands'.

Dongfang listened, engrossed. "Have you ever been to the border regions?" He asked when the tune finished.

"I have just returned from there," Chen replied. "How did you know?"

"Your playing conjures up the vast emptiness of the great desert. I have heard that tune many times in my life, but never have I heard it played with such feeling." Chen saw he indeed had a great knowledge of music and was very pleased.

"There is something I would like to ask you," Dongfang continued.

"Please feel free to ask."

"I would guess that you are from the family of an official," he said. "What post does your respected father hold? And what is your rank?"

"My father has unfortunately passed away. I myself am a man of mediocre abilities with no official rank," Chen replied.

"But you are obviously greatly talented. Could it be that the examiners failed to appreciate your abilities?"

"No, it is not that."

"The Commander-in-chief of Zhejiang province is a friend of mine. If you went to see him tomorrow, you could have an opportunity."

"Thank you for your kind thought, but I have no wish to be an official," Chen replied.

"But do you intend to hide yourself away like this forever?"

"I would prefer to live in seclusion than oppress the common people."

Dongfang's expression suddenly changed and the two blue-gowned attendants both took a step forward. He was silent for a second, then laughed out loud.

"You are indeed a man of noble character," he said. "Simple folk such as myself cannot be compared with you."

The two weighed each other up, aware that there was something special about the other.

"You must have heard much news on your long journey from the Moslem regions," Dongfang said.

"When I arrived at the Yellow River, I found great flooding and many homeless people. I had no heart for appreciating the scenery after that."

"I am told that the refugees in Lanfeng looted grain stores meant for the western army. Did you hear anything about that?"

Chen started in surprise and wondered how he could have known. They had hurried south after the Lanfeng incident without resting. "I understand there was such an incident," he said. "The refugees had no clothes and no food and the local officials did nothing to help them. They were forced to break the law in order to survive, an action which under the circumstances is pardonable."

Dongfang was silent for a while. "I understand it was not quite simple as that," he said nonchalantly. "I heard the Red Flower Society incited the refugees."

"What is the Red Flower Society?" asked Chen, feigning ignorance.

"It is rebellious underworld society. Have you never heard of it?"

"I am afraid that between my lute and my chess board, I have little time for the affairs of the world."

"There's no need to be ashamed. These people are in any case no great problem."

"What basis do you have for saying that?"

"The Emperor is on the throne and the administration of the country is enlightened and orderly. Once one or two men with talent are assigned to the job, the Red Flower Society will be destroyed in no time at all."

"I know nothing of administration, so please do not laugh if I should say something stupid. But in my humble opinion, most court officials are drunkards and guzzlers. I doubt if they would be able to accomplish such a mission."

As he spoke, Dongfang and his three attendants turned pale.

"That is simply the view of a scholar," Dongfang replied. "These friends of mine here are of more than mediocre ability. If you were a student of the martial arts, you would know that I was not exaggerating."

"I lack even the strength to tie up a chicken, but I have always had the greatest respect for heroic fighters," Chen said. "Are these your pupils? I wonder if you could ask them to perform a demonstration of their abilities?"

"Show this Master Lu one of your tricks," Dongfang said to the attendants.

"Thank you," said Chen.

One of the attendants stepped forward. "That magpie in the tree is too noisy," he said. "I'll knock it down so we can have some peace."

With a wave of his hand, a sleeve dart shot off towards the magpie, but just as it neared the target, it suddenly veered off to one side and missed.

Donggang looked surprised and the attendant's face went red with embarrassment. He threw another dart. This time everyone was watching closely and saw a piece of earth knock the dart off course.

The old man noticed Xin Yan's hand had moved slightly and realised he was responsible. "This young brother's kung fu is excellent. We must get to know one another," he said and grasped for Xin Yan's hand with fingers of steel.

Chen was surprised to see the old man was using Great Eagle's Claw kung fu. "There are only a handful of men as good as that," he thought. "Why would such a man agree to be Dongfang's servant?"

He flicked open his fan in front of Xin Yan as the old man lunged at the boy, and the old man quickly withdrew. As his master was treating Chen in a friendly manner, it would be extremely disrespectful to damage one of his possessions. He glanced at Chen, wondering if he knew kung fu. Chen began fanning himself lightly, completely relaxed as if the move a second ago had been a pure

coincidence.

"This boy's kung fu is very good despite his youth," said Dongfang. "Where did you find him?"

"He doesn't know kung fu," replied Chen. "But he has been throwing things at insects and birds since he was small, and he's become quite good at it."

Dongfang could see this was untrue, but did not pursue the matter. He looked at Chen's fan.

"Whose is the calligraphy on your fan? May I look?" he asked. Chen handed the fan over to him.

"A man who was not of such noble character as yourself would be unworthy of this object. Where did you get it?"

"I bought it in a bookstore for ten gold pieces."

"If you had paid ten times as much, I would still consider it a bargain," Dongfang replied. "Possessions such as this are usually passed down from generation to generation in the great families. It is certainly amazing that you were able to buy it so easily in a bookstore."

Chen knew Dongfang didn't believe him, but he didn't care. He smiled lightly.

"I like this fan very much," Dongfang said. "I wonder if I could ask you to sell it to me?"

"If you like it, I would be pleased to give it to you," Chen replied.

Dongfang accepted the fan and lifted up the ancient lute and presented it to Chen. "Just as an heroic fighter should be presented with a treasured sword, so should this lute belong to you."

Chen knew the lute was extremely valuable, and he wondered why the man wanted to exchange gifts so soon after they had met. But as the son of a high official, he had seen many treasures and was not dazzled by them. He saluted Dongfang with his fists in thanks and told Xin Yan to pick the lute up.

"If there is anything I can ever do for you in the future, please come to Beijing with that lute and just ask for me," Dongfang said. "Why don't we walk back down the hill together?"

"Fine," said Chen, and the two started off, holding hands.

As they reached the Hidden Spirit monastery, several people came towards them, led by a handsome-faced man wearing an embroidered gown. The man bore a striking resemblance to Chen and was even about the same age, but he lack Chen's imposing air. Chen and he started in surprise as they looked at each other.

"Isn't he like you, Brother Lu?" Dongfang said. "Kang, come and meet Master Lu."

Kang bowed towards him, and Chen quickly returned the courtesy.

All of a sudden, they heard a girl call out in surprise. Chen turned and saw Zhou Qi with Xu and her parents emerging from the monastery, and knew she must have struck with surprise at the sight of two Great Helmsmen Chen's. He saw Xu hustling her away and turned back.

"Brother Lu," Dongfang said. "We seem to have become good friends on our first meeting. We will meet again. Goodbye." They bowed to each other and Dongfang walked off guarded by several dozen of the blue-gowned men.

Chen turned and nodded slightly in Xu's direction. Xu hurriedly made his apologies to Lord Zhou and to Zhou Qi and followed after Dongfang and his companions.

Towards evening, he returned to make his report. "The fellow spent a long time floating about on the lake and then went to the Provincial Commander-in-chief's Yamen," he said.

Chen told him about his meeting with Dongfang, and the two decided he must be a very senior official, either an Imperial Inspector-General or a member of the Emperor's close family. From his appearance, he did not look like a Manchu, and so they concluded he was probably an Inspector General.

"Could his arrival have anything to do with Fourth Brother, I wonder," Chen mused. "I think I will go over to the Commander-in-chief's Yamen personally this evening to investigate."

"It would be best to take someone with you just in case," Xu replied.

"Ask Brother Zhao," said Chen. "He's from Zhejiang province so he should know something of Hangzhou."

At nine o'clock, Chen and 'Buddha' Zhao started out for the Commander-in-chief's Yamen. Using Lightness Kung Fu, they soon found themselves near the wall of the Yamen. They spotted two figures patrolling on a rooftop close by and crouched down to watch for a while. Zhao waited for them both to turn their backs, then sent a pellet shooting off towards a tree a few dozen yards away. Hearing a noise in the branches, the guards quickly went over to investigate, giving Chen and Zhao an opportunity to slip silently over the wall into the Yamen.

They hid in the shadows and looked out over the Yamen's main courtyard. To their surprise, they found it brightly lit with torches and several hundred troops standing guard. Another strange thing was that so many soldiers could be so quiet. When they moved, they walked lightly on tip-toe, and the only sounds that could be heard were the call of a cicada and an occasional crackle from the burning torches.

Chen could see there was no way of getting in. He gestured towards Zhao and the two retreated, avoiding the rooftop guards. They stopped behind a wall to discuss what to do.

"We don't want to alert them," Chen whispered. "We'll have to go back and think of some other plan."

Just then, a side gate of the Yamen creaked open and an officer emerged followed by four soldiers. The five marched down the street a few hundred yards and then turned back, obviously on patrol.

"Get them," Chen whispered. Zhao slipped out of the shadows and threw three darts, and three of the soldiers immediately dropped to the ground. Chen followed with two of his chess pieces, hitting the officer and the remaining soldier. They quickly dragged the five into the shadows, stripped the uniforms from two of the men and put them on themselves.

They waited once more for the rooftop guards to turn away, then jumped over

the Yamen wall and strode nonchalantly into the torch-lit courtyard. They passed through into an inner courtyard which was being patrolled exclusively by senior military officials, commanders and generals. Waiting for the right moment, they leapt up under the eaves of one of the buildings, then hung onto the rafters not daring to breathe. Once it was clear they had not been discovered. Chen hooked his legs over a beam and hung down over a window. He moistened the window paper and looked inside, as Zhao kept guard beside him.

Chen found himself looking in at a large hall. Five or six men wearing the gowns of high officials stood in the centre facing another man who was seated with his back to Chen. Another official walked in and kowtowed nine times towards the seated man.

Chen was surprised. "That is the ceremonial form used when entering the presence of the Emperor," he thought. "Could it be Qian Long himself is in Hangzhou?"

"Zhejiang Province Civil Administrator Yin to see your Highness the Emperor," the officer said.

So it was the Emperor, Chen thought. No wonder security was so tight.

"I have sent troops to quell the Muslim regions," the Emperor said. "I hear you object to this idea."

Chen frowned: he found the Emperor's voice strangely familiar.

"I deserve to die, I would not dare," Yin said, continuing to kowtow.

"I asked Zhejiang Province to supply six thousand tons of grain to meet the needs of the army. Why did you disobey my orders?"

"I truly would not dare, your Highness," Yin said. "But the harvest in Zhejiang this year has been very poor. The common people are in great hardship, and it is temporarily impossible to supply such an amount."

"So the common people are in great hardship, are they? The army is in urgent need of food supplies. Shall I tell them to starve out there?"

"I wouldn't dare to say," Yin quavered, continuing to kowtow.

"No, I want you to tell me," replied the Emperor.

"Your Highness's ability to spread enlightenment and civilisation is far-reaching. The Muslim barbarians are in fact not worth such a long trek by Your Highness's armies. As the Ancients said: 'Soldiers are instruments of violence which a man of virtue should use only as a last resort.' Your Highness could cancel the campaign, and the whole world would be thankful for your benevolence."

"The people are discontented because I have decided to wage this campaign, is that correct?" Qian Long replied coldly.

Yin kowtowed even more energetically. His forehead was by now covered in blood.

Qian Long laughed shortly. "You have a hard skull," he said. "If you hadn't, you wouldn't dare to contradict me."

He turned round and Chen started violently: the Emperor was the Master Dongfang he had met earlier that day.

"Get out!" he heard Qian Long shout. "And leave your cap here!" Yin kowtowed a few more times and then retired.

"There must certainly be some irregularities in Yin's affairs," Qian Long said to the remaining officials. "I want the Commander-in-chief to conduct a thorough investigation and inform me of the results. He must not be protected for personal reasons. His crimes must be exposed." The officials assented in chorus.

"Now leave me. And arrange for six thousand tons of grain to be collected and dispatched immediately." The officials kowtowed and retired.

"Tell Kang to come," the Emperor added, and an attendant left and returned a moment later with Chen's look-alike. He stood close to Qian Long with an air of familiarity very different from the cringing manner of the officials.

"Call for Li Keshou," Qian Long ordered, and a military officer quickly appeared, kowtowing his way into the Emperor's presence.

"Li Keshou, commander-in-chief of Zhejiang Province, pays his respect to Your Highness," he said.

"How is that Red Flower Society bandit chief, Wen Tailai?" asked Qian Long.

"He was arrested after a savage battle and he is very seriously wounded," Li replied. "I have assigned doctors to treat him. We will have to wait until his mind is clear before we can question him."

"You must be careful," Qian Long said.

"Your servant would not dare to be the slightest bit neglectful," replied Li.

"Go now," said the Emperor, and Li retired.

"Let's follow him," Chen whispered, but as they dropped quietly to the ground, someone inside the hall shouted: "Intruders!"

Chen and Zhao ran into the outer courtyard and mingled with the troops. Bamboo clappers sounded loudly and the old man Chen had seen earlier that day with the Emperor began directing a search.

Chen and Zhao walked slowly towards the gate.

"Who are you?" the old man shouted at them, and grabbed for Zhao. Zhao deflected his hand, and they made a run for it with the old man chasing. As they reached the gate, the old man lunged at Zhao. Chen ripped off the uniform he was wearing and flung it over the old man's head, then they raced out of the Yamen gate. The old man cast the uniform off to one side and chased after them. But the slight delay had made all the difference.

Two or three thousand troops swarmed out behind the old man like bees from a hive.

"All of you get back!" he shouted. "Protecting the Emperor is more important! You five, come with me." He ran off down the street with the five guards, following the two black shapes flying over the rooftops ahead.

The old man gradually closed the distance between himself and the intruders. Suddenly, the two figures leapt down and stood stock-still in the middle of the street. The old man lunged at Chen.

"I am your master's good friend." Chen laughed, not bothering to retreat or defend himself. "You are an audacious old fellow!"

The old man looked at his face under the moonlight and started in surprise.

"So it's you," he said, retracting his hand, "Come along with me."

"Do you dare to follow me?" Chen asked with a smile.

The old man hesitated, and as the five guards ran up from behind, Chen and Zhao raced off westwards towards the West Lake.

"After them!" shouted the old man. The guards reached the lake in time to see Chen and Zhao jump into a boat and push off from the shore. The boatman punted the craft out several yards from the bank.

"My friends," the old man shouted. "Please tell me who you are before you go."

"I am Zhao Banshan from Wenzhou," Zhao roared. "You, I take it, are a member of the Songyang martial arts school?"

"Ah, so you are the one they call the Thousand Arm Buddha?"

"That's just a nickname. I don't really deserve it. And your name, sir?"

"My surname is Bai, my name Zhen."

Zhao and Chen gasped in surprise. Bai Zhen was a famous kung fu master, but he had not been seen or heard of for years. Obviously, he had become the personal bodyguard of the Emperor.

"So it's you, Master Bai. No wonder your kung fu is so superb," said Zhao.

"I hear you are a leading member of the Red Flower Society, Master Zhao. Who is your companion?" Suddenly, he realized the answer without having to be told. "Oh, of course, it must be Master Chen, the Great Helmsman of the society, is that right?"

Chen opened his fan. "The moon is clear and the wind is fresh," he said. "Why not come and drink a cup of wine with us, Master Bai?"

"You have intruded into the Commander-in-chief's Yamen, and disturbed the official household. You must accompany me to see my master. He is well-disposed towards you, and would not do you any harm."

"Go back and ask your master to come and have a chat with me," Chen replied. "We can have a drink together if he wishes. I will wait for him here."

Bai had seen the concern with which the Emperor had treated Chen earlier, and he dared not offend Chen. But after such an intrusion into the quarters of the Emperor, he was also loath to return without them. There were, however, no other boats nearby, and with no way of chasing after them across the lake, he was forced to return to report to Qian Long.

"It would be quite nice to go to the lake and enjoy the moonlight," Qian Long said after a pause. "Go and tell him I will come immediately."

"These are dangerous bandits," replied Bai. "In my humble opinion, you should not risk such danger."

"Go," said Qian Long.

Bai did not dare to press the matter further, and rode swiftly back to the lake. 'Crocodile' Jiang was sitting at the stern of a boat with his arms round his knees, waiting for him.

"Tell your master that my master will be here soon," Bai shouted.

"Heaven knows what the Emperor sees in this fellow," he thought as he hurried back to resume his guard of the Emperor's person.

Qian Long was in high spirits, and talked and laughed as Commander Li Keshou waited on him. He had changed into an ordinary gown, while his bodyguards had also put on civilian clothes. Once at the lakeside, he gave his orders.

"He probably already knows who I am, but I want everyone still to pretend to be common people."

Imperial guard units had been hidden all around the lake with troops hand-picked by Commander Li behind them. Beyond the flickering lantern light, they saw five boats gliding towards them across the water. 'Leopard' Wei stood on the bow of the middle boat.

"I have been sent by Master Lu to invite Master Dongfang onto the lake to enjoy the moon," he announced, and jumped onto the bank and bowed before Qian Long.

Qian Long nodded slightly. "Excellent," he said, and stepped onto the boat.

Commander Li, Bai and thirty or forty bodyguards boarded the boats with him. More than a dozen of the bodyguards were expert swimmers, and Bai ordered them to keep their wits about them.

They started out across the lake, which was a fairyland of lights. Pleasure boats were everywhere, bedecked with lanterns that filled the darkness like stars in the night sky and the sound of music floated across towards them. A small sampan darted into view then turned and led the boats to a flotilla of other craft. Despite the huge number of troops they had stationed around the shore, Bai and the other bodyguards were uneasy at the sight of such a powerful force, and all covertly felt for the weapons they had hidden around their persons.

"So you decided to come, Master Dongfang," Chen called from a nearby boat. "Please come aboard!"

The two boats drew alongside each and Qian Long, Commander Li, Bai, and several other bodyguards jumped across. Bai and the others relaxed as they saw that Chen and his attendant, Xin Yan, were the only other people on the boat. The cabin was spacious, with exquisite murals on the walls. The table in the centre was set with wine cups, bowls and chopsticks and was covered with dishes of fruit, wine and all manner of delicacies.

Chen and his guest shook hands and smiled broadly, then sat down facing each other. Commander Li, Bai and the others stood behind Qian Long.

Chen smiled briefly at Bai and noticed a handsome-faced youth standing behind Commander Li whom he recognised as Lu Feiqing's pupil. Surprised, he wondered what the youth was doing accompanying court officials.

Xin Yan poured some wine, and Chen, afraid that Qian Long would be suspicious, drained his own cup first, then began eating. Qian Long picked at a few of the dishes that Chen had already tried, then put down his chopsticks. He heard a flute on a neighbouring boat playing the tune 'Welcome the Honoured Guest.'

"You are truly a man of culture," he said to Chen. "It is amazing that you managed to arrange things so well at such short notice."

Chen dismissed the praise. "One cannot drink wine without music," he said. "I understand Beautiful Jade has the best voice in all Zhejiang Province. Shall I ask

her to sing for us?"

Qian Long clapped his hands in approval. "Who is this Beautiful Jade?" he asked, turning to Commander Li.

"She is one of Hangzhou's most famous courtezans," he replied. "I have heard that she is very haughty by nature and if it does not please her, she won't even show herself let alone sing, no matter how much she is offered."

"Have you ever seen her?" Qian Long asked.

"I...no I haven't," Li replied, extremely embarrassed.

'Leopard' Wei escorted Beautiful Jade out. Qian Long looked admiringly at the perfect whiteness of her skin and her petite figure, but decided her face was not particularly attractive. Her eyes, however, were full of life, and her glance around the cabin contained an intimate greeting for every person there.

Chen stretched out his hand towards Qian Long. "This is Master Dongfang," he said. Beautiful Jade greeted him, then sat down next to Chen and cuddled up to him.

"I hear you sing very well," Chen said. "I wonder if you would allow us the pleasure of enjoying your talent?"

"If you want to hear me sing, Master Lu, I will sing for three days and three nights continuously. But I am afraid you would tire of me." An attendant handed her a pipa, and with a light strum, she began to sing:

"Outside the window all is quiet
You kneel before the bed eager for some kissing
I scold you, call you heartless, and turn away,
But despite my words I am still half willing."

Chen applauded enthusiastically. Qian Long, hearing her smooth, clear voice, felt a warm feeling rising in his chest. Beautiful Jade smiled, then strummed the pipa and turned to Qian Long:

"I want to beat you,
Don't think I'm joking," she sang.

"I clench my teeth

This time I really will
But you won't fear me
If I hit you softly,
And I cannot bear
To hit you hard.
Oh, my lover
I won't hit you after all."

The Emperor was completely carried away by the song. "If you want to hit me, then hit me," he said.

Qian Long, born and raised in the depths of the Imperial Palace had seen many girl singers, but all of them had been dignified and monotonous, nothing like this southern Chinese courtesan. He was entranced by her eyes and her seductiveness, and the song, the perfumed lake, the moon's reflection, all conspired to make the scene dreamlike, so that gradually he forgot that he was with renowned bandits.

Beautiful Jade poured some wine for Chen and Qian Long and the two drank three cups in succession while Beautiful Jade drank one to keep them company. Qian Long took a jade ring off his finger and gave it to her.

"Sing another song," he said. Beautiful Jade looked down and giggled, revealing two little dimples. Qian Long's heart melted.

"All right," she said. She batted her eyelids at him then struck up a tune on the pipa. This time, the rhythm was fast and light with a complex melody, and Qian Long shouted out his approval.

She sang of a poor man with ambitions who gradually climbs his way up, first obtaining clothes, then a house, a wife and concubines, and then power. Finally, he begins to covet the throne of the emperor himself.

Chen laughed heartily, but as the song progressed, Qian Long's expression became increasingly dour. "Could this girl know who I really am and be singing this song to make fun of me?" he wondered.

Beautiful Jade finished the song and slowly put down her pipa.

"The song makes fun of poor men," she said with a smile. "Both of you,

Master Dongfang and Master Chen, are wealthy gentlemen with large mansions, lovely wives and beautiful concubines. You would not think of such things."

Qian Long laughed, and his eyes travelled over her, taking in her softness, her fun-loving spirit. He wondered how he should go about telling Commander Li to have her brought to the Yamen, and how to make sure the affair remained secret.

"The Emperor Xuanzong had a great interest in beautiful women," he suddenly heard Chen say. "That in itself is not important, but he should not have put his weakness for women above the interests of the nation."

"The Xuanzong Emperor was at first a wise ruler, but he became muddle-headed in his later years. He was far inferior to his ancestor, Emperor Taizong," Qian Long replied.

"Taizong was certainly a very capable ruler," said Chen.

The two men Qian Long most venerated in all the world were Emperor Wu of the Han dynasty and Emperor Taizong of the Tang dynasty. Both had greatly expanded the empire, and their reputations had carried far beyond their borders. Ever since he had ascended the throne, Qian Long had worked single-mindedly to emulate them and had sent armies out on long expeditions to the Muslim border regions with the intention of carrying on their work.

"Emperor Taizong was wise and courageous," he said. "The barbarians cringed in fear at the sound of his name. He was proficient in both letters and war. Such talent would be hard to equal."

"I have read the Emperor Taizong's works," said Chen. "He makes some points which I feel are very true."

"Such as?"

"He said: 'The ruler can be compared to a boat, and the common people to water. The water can support the boat or sink it.'"

Qian Long was silent.

"Sitting as we are in this boat, the metaphor could not be more apt," Chen continued. "If we row smoothly, we will have a very stable ride. But if we row

about frenziedly, or if the water should rush by in a raging torrent, the boat will certainly capsize."

His words contained not only the implication that the people could overthrow the Emperor whenever they wished, but also the threat of throwing Qian Long into the water there and then. Never in his life had Qian Long had such threatening words addressed to him. His anger surged up and unable to control himself, he threw his wine cup at the floor.

The cup flew downwards, but just as it was about to hit the deck, Xin Yan shot out and caught it. He presented it to Qian Long on bended knee. "Master Dongfang, you dropped your cup," he said.

The speed of his move startled Qian Long. Commander Li took the cup from Xin Yan and watched for some sign from the Emperor's eyes. But Qian Long composed himself and laughed.

"Brother Lu, this little helper of yours is very agile," he said, and turned to one of the guardsman. "Play with the little fellow," he said.

The guardsman, who was surnamed Fan, bent down and struck out at Xin Yan with his pair of large swords. Xin Yan somersaulted over backwards and landed on the bow of the boat.

"Let's play hide and seek," he said to Fan with a smile. "If you catch me, we'll say I've lost and then I'll chase you."

Fan was furious at having missed his target and bounded after him, but the boy soared off through the air like a great bird and landed on a small sampan nearby. The two chased each other across more than a dozen boats before Fan finally cornered Xin Yan at the end of a string of three boats. He thrust the sword in his left hand at Xin Yan's chest, and Xin Yan countered by striking out with his fist at Fan's stomach. Fan then leapt up in the air, aiming to fall on Xin Yan from above. But as he jumped, the boatman, 'Crocodile' Jiang, twirled his oar and spun the boat around. Fan shouted in fear as the boat disappeared from under him, and he fell heavily into the lake. Xin Yan clapped in delight.

Two of Qian Long's bodyguards dived into the water to save Fan, who was splashing and clutching at the air in desperation. Meanwhile, Jiang placed his oar in front of Fan, who grabbed it and held on tight. Jiang then swung the oar

up, tossing Fan over towards Qian Long's boat, and shouted "Catch!" A bodyguard ran to the bow and caught him. Another bodyguard, surnamed Long, stepped forward.

"I understand this little brother is also very proficient with missiles," he said darkly as Xin Yan moved back to Chen's side. "Let us spar for a while."

"You and I are already firm friends," Chen said to Qian Long. "We should not allow our servants to disturb the pleasant atmosphere with their bickering. As this gentleman is an expert in the use of darts, let us ask him to display his talent on something other than my serving boy. What do you think?"

"Fine, except we don't have a target," Qian Long replied. Xin Yan leapt over onto the boat on which 'Iron Pagoda' Yang was sitting and whispered into his ear.

Yang nodded, waved to Zhang Jin in the next sampan, and pointed to another boat nearby. "Grab the end of that boat," he said, and took hold of the other end himself. "Up!" he shouted and the two lifted the little boat out of the water while their own boats sank lower. The others gasped at this awesome display of strength.

"Master, will this do as a target?" Xin Yan shouted. "Please come and draw a bulls-eye on it."

Chen raised his wine cup and drained it, then flung it at the boat. It sliced into the keel without shattering. The onlookers clapped and cheered. Bai and the other bodyguards frowned at the sight of such phenomenal power: a man whose Inner Strength Kung Fu allowed him to drive a porcelain cup into a boat keel as if it was a steel dart was a formidable opponent.

"Use the cup as the target," Chen suggested, smiling. Bodyguard Long silently pulled five spiked balls from his bag and threw them one after the other. They struck the target with a quick "rat-a-tat" and slivers of porcelain flew in all directions.

Xin Yan slipped out from behind the boat. "Not bad!" he shouted.

Long was suddenly swept with a wave of malice, and he threw another five of the spiked balls at Xin Yan.

A shout of surprise went up from the others, and greatly frightened, Xin Yan lunged to one side, but one of the spiked balls struck his left shoulder. There was no pain, but the shoulder immediately went numb. The heroes edged their little boats forward, all eager to match themselves against Long.

The other Imperial bodyguards were ashamed that Long should use such a low trick against a boy in front of the Emperor. But protecting His Highness was of overriding importance, and they immediately pulled out their weapons. Commander Li gave a sharp whistle, signalling the troops on the shore to mobilise.

"Brothers!" Chen called. "Master Dongfang is my honoured guest. We cannot show any impoliteness towards him. Move back, all of you."

The heroes rowed back several yards. Yang and Zhang Jin had already put the target boat back to the water, and Luo Bing was inspecting Xin Yan's wound. 'Mastermind' Xu also jumped over to see how he was.

"Don't worry, it's not painful," Xin Yan said. "But it's very itchy."

He moved his hand up to scratch the wound and Xu quickly stopped him. He could see the spiked ball had been dipped in a very powerful poison.

"Let go of me," Xin Yan yelled. "It's too itchy to bear!" He struggled powerfully to break free.

"Be patient for a moment," Xu told Xin Yan, trying not to look as worried as he felt. He turned to Luo Bing. "Ask Third Brother to come over."

Another boat moved swiftly up alongside with the Red Flower Society's Hangzhou chief Master Ma standing on the brow. He leapt over next to Xu and whispered: "Master Xu, the whole lake is surrounded by Manchu troops including Imperial Guard units."

"How many altogether?"

"Seven or eight thousand not counting the reserve forces waiting further away."

"Go and call together all the brothers in Hangzhou and surrounding areas. Tell them to gather near the lake and await orders. Also tell them to have a red

flower hidden on their persons." Ma nodded.

"How many can you get together immediately?" Xu asked.

"Including the workers from my factories, about two thousand," he replied.

"Two thousand of our brothers should be enough to deal with fifteen thousand of them," said Xu. "And what's more, many of the troops in the Chinese units are society members. Go and make the arrangements." Ma nodded and left.

'Buddha' Zhao's boat glided over. He looked at Xin Yan's wound and frowned deeply. He carefully pulled out the poisonous spiked ball, then took a large medicine pill from his bag and placed it into the open wound. He looked up at Xu.

"There's nothing I can do," he said, desolation in his voice. "The poison is extremely potent. No-one can save him except the man responsible."

"How long can he hold on?" Xu asked, greatly frightened.

"At the most, six hours."

"Third Brother, let's go and get that fellow over here and force him to deliver the antidote."

Zhao leapt in three great bounds over to the boat in which Chen and Qian Long were sitting, with each bound touching down on the deck of a different boat.

"Master Lu," he said. "I would like to ask this gentleman to acquaint me with some of his tricks."

Chen, who was furious at the wounding of Xin Yan, turned to Qian Long.

"This friend of mine is also quite good with projectiles," he said. "It would be interesting to see them matched against each other."

The Emperor was eager to see any spectacle, the more dangerous the better. "Go on," he said to Long. "But don't lose." Long bowed.

"That's the Thousand-Arm Buddha," Bai whispered. "Be careful."

Long knew the name well, and shuddered at the thought of facing him. But he

had never yet met his equal in the field of projectiles. "This is just between you and me," he said to Zhao.

"Do you think we would trick you?" Zhao demanded angrily.

"Right. That's what I wanted to hear you say," Long replied, and leapt onto the prow of a boat nearby.

Zhao sent off a flurry of darts and sleeve arrows after him, and Long's heart froze at the sight of such speed. He threw himself down onto the deck and the darts struck the boat with a quick succession of popping noises.

Long jumped up again, and spotting Zhao's figure in the moonlight, flung a dart at him. Zhao dodged to the right to avoid it, and suddenly found three of the poisoned spiked balls winging towards him. He leant over backwards and the spiked balls whizzed passed the tip of his nose. Three more spiked balls followed in quick succession. Zhao knocked two of them into the water with darts of his own, then caught the third and placed it inside his gown.

Long leapt towards another boat and Zhao threw out a boomerang-shaped blade. Long ducked and watched in surprise as the blade swirled over him and returned to Zhao's hand. Fascinated by the sight of the strange weapon, Long failed to notice two other darts flying towards him which simultaneously struck both his shoulders. His body went limp and he fell to his knees.

The Imperial Guards were astounded at the sight of him falling. Chu Yuan, one of Long's comrades, raced over to defend him, but another swordsman intercepted him. Chu saw in the moonlight that the man was dressed in Taoist robes.

"Who are you?" he barked.

Priest Wu Chen smiled. "Do you mean to say you are a swordsman and you don't know me?" he asked.

Chu attacked with a 'Buddha Ambushing the Tiger' stroke followed by a 'Nine Successions' stroke.

"That's very good," Wu Chen said, still smiling. "Now continue with a 'Gold Wheel' stroke".

As he spoke, Chu did indeed attack with a 'Gold Wheel' stroke. "How did he know?" he wondered, startled. The priest also guessed his next two moves correctly, just as if he was a teacher instructing a pupil. Chu retreated two paces and stared at him, embarrassed.

Meanwhile, Zhao had grabbed Long and was pressuring him to hand over the antidote. Long, however closed his eyes and said nothing. "Just as long as I don't give in, the Emperor will surely reward me when we get back," he thought.

Priest Wu Chen continued his game of forcing Bodyguard Chu to counter with the moves he called out. Qian Long, although a mediocre fighter himself, had a thorough knowledge of kung fu and was amused by the spectacle. But he felt the chill of anxiety too.

"Chu is one of the top Imperial Bodyguards," he thought. "What use are they if these bandits can play with them in such a fashion?" He watched for a few more moves and then decided he had had enough.

"Tell him to come back," he said to Bai.

"Brother Chu," Bai shouted. "The Master asks you to come here."

Chu breathed a sigh of relief. The Emperor's order was like a reprieve from the death sentence, and he prepared to jump away. Priest Wu Chen, however, had other ideas.

"Just a moment," he said. He struck forward with his sword and Chu felt a cool breeze course across his face and body as the sword flashed about him. The courtesan Beautiful Jade suddenly laughed out loud, and Chu looked down and saw that his clothes had been cut to shreds by the priest's sword. Not only that: he felt his head and found his hair and queue had been shaved completely off. As he shook with fear and shame, his trousers suddenly fell down.

"These friends of yours are extraordinarily skilled in the martial arts, Master Lu," Qian Long said to Chen. "Why don't you all offer your services to the court? It is a pity to waste such talent."

Chen smiled. "We would prefer to do just as we please," he said. "But thank you. We are very grateful of the offer."

"Since that is the case, I will take my leave. It is getting late." Qian Long

looked meaningfully over at Bodyguard Long in the other boat.

"Brother Zhao," Chen called. "Let Master Dongfang's servant come back."

"Absolutely not!" Luo Bing answered. "Xin Yan has poisoned by him and he refuses to hand over the antidote."

Qian Long whispered some instructions to Commander Li, then turned to Long. "Give him the antidote," he ordered.

"I deserve to die," Long replied. "I didn't bring the antidote with me. I left it in Beijing."

"Brother Zhao, give me two of those spiked balls," said Xu. Zhao pulled them out of his bag and handed them over. Xu ripped Long's gown off his chest and drove the balls into him. Long cried out in panic.

"Master Lu," Xu shouted. "Please send over some wine. We want to drink a toast with our friend here to seal our friendship, and then we will let him go."

"All right," said Chen. Beautiful Jade filled three cups with wine, and Chen threw them one by one over to the other boat. Zhao calmly stetched out his hand and caught them without a drop being spilled.

Xu took one of the cups. "Master Long, let us drink a toast," he said. Long knew that the alcohol would greatly speed up the effects of the poison and clamped his mouth shut.

"Go on, have a drink. There's no need to stand on ceremony," said Xu with a smile. He grabbed Long's nose between his third and little fingers then pressed strongly on his cheeks with the thumb and forefinger, forcing Long to open his mouth, and poured all three cups of wine into him.

Long decided his life was more important than his reputation. "Let me go," he said. "I...I...I'll get the antidote," Zhao laughed and loosened his grip. Long pulled three packets of medicine from his bag.

"The red one should be taken orally, the black one sucks out the poison and the white one closes the wound," he said and fainted away.

Zhao hurriedly poured the red medicine into one of the wine cups, mixed it with some lake water and gave it to Xin Yan to drink, then spread the black

medicine onto the wound. A moment later, black blood welled out of the gash. Luo Bing wiped it up as it appeared, and gradually the blood turned red. Xin Yan cried out in pain as Zhao administered the white medicine.

"Please forgive my friends," Chen said to Qian Long. "They are very unrefined."

Qian Long laughed. "It has certainly been an interesting day. I will take my leave now."

"Master Dongfang wishes to go home," Chen called. "Head back to the shore!"

The flotilla glided slowly off, and soon reached the lakeside. Commander Li jumped ashore and helped Qian Long across onto land as the bodyguards formed a protective semi-circle. Li pulled out a pipe and blew three sharp notes on it, and several hundred Imperial troops appeared.

"You insolent wretches!" Li shouted at the Red Flower Society fighters. "You are in the sight of the Emperor and still you don't kowtow?"

Xu gestured with his hand, and Master Ma and his son fired flares up into the air above the lake. A moment later, a huge roar went up from all sides, and men rushed out from the trees, from behind buildings and from under bridges, each one with a red flower on his lapel and a sword in his hand.

"Brothers!" Xu shouted. "The Great Helmsman has arrived!" The society men roared their approval and surged forward.

The Imperial Bodyguards and troops drew their swords, fixed arrows to bows, and the two sides confronted each other, each determined not to yield. Commander Li mounted a horse and waited for Qian Long's order to seize the Red Flower Society fighters.

Chen walked calmly over to an officer of the Imperial Bodyguard and pointed at the horsewhip he was holding. Hypnotised by Chen's gaze, the officer meekly dismounted and handed the whip over. Chen then leapt onto his horse and pulled a red flower from his pocket which he fixed to his gown. The flower was made from the finest silk stitched with gold thread and the green leaves around it were studded with jewels which glittered and sparkled in the torchlight. It was the badge of the Great Helmsman and the Red Flower Society heroes bowed

before him in respect.

Suddenly, a large number of the soldiers broke from the Manchu ranks and swarmed forward despite shouts from their officers. They raced over to Chen, bowed, then ran back to their ranks as another batch ran out to pay their respects. The Red Flower Society's power was so great in the south that many soldiers in the Manchu armies, especially those in units under Chinese command, were members.

Qian Long was flabbergasted at the sight of so many of his own troops breaking ranks to bow before Chen. The Imperial Guard units he had brought with him from Beijing were clearly the only ones he could trust, and considering the danger of his position, he decided a fight had to be avoided at all costs.

He turned to Commander Li.

"So these are your trusted soldiers," he said coldly. "Tell them to retire."

"Yes sir," replied Li, stunned with fear. He ordered the troops back to camp.

"Brothers!" 'Mastermind' Xu shouted when he saw the Manchu troops were retreating. "Thank you all for your trouble. Please go now."

An answering roar went up from the mass of the Society followers: "Great Helmsman, goodbye!" The thunderous cry echoed out over the lake.

Qian Long raised his hands towards Chen. "Thank you for a very pleasant outing on the lake," he said. "We will meet again."

Chapter 5

'Mastermind' Xu went later to see the Muslim envoy.

"I will take you to see the Emperor," he said, and they left, accompanied by Meng carrying the leather box containing the vases. Unknown to the envoy, one of the vases had been removed.

When they arrived at the Commander-in-Chief's Yamen, Meng handed the leather box to the envoy and pointed to the main gate.

"Go in on your own," he said.

That afternoon, an attendant handed a visiting card to Great Helmsman Chen. It was signed 'Your servant Deng Tunan', the trusted lieutenant of Commander Li Keshou.

"Your plan has probably worked, Brother Xu," Chen said. "Brother Wei, please go and receive him."

'Leopard' Wei went to the reception room and saw a robust military official seated in a chair. "What is it you wish to see our master about, Master Deng?" he asked.

"I have come with instructions from Commander-in-Chief Li to see the Great Helmsman of your society to discuss a certain matter with him," Deng replied.

"Our master is not free at present. It is the same if you talk to me."

"It concerns a Muslim vase," he said.

Wei frowned enquiringly.

"The Muslims dispatched an envoy with a pair of vases to plead for peace. But when the Emperor opened the box, only one of the vases was inside. He was very angry and questioned the envoy, who said that he had already had an audience with the Commander-in-Chief of Zhejiang Province. The Emperor called in Commander Li, who was naturally mystified. Luckily, the Emperor knew Commander Li would not do such a thing, that there must be some good explanation."

"That is good," said Wei, nodding.

"But the Emperor said that Commander Li would be held responsible for the affair and gave him three days to find and return the other vase. This presents a great difficulty."

"He's afraid that if he doesn't find the vase, he will be removed from office, is that it? It's probably easier not being an official. If one's whole family could to be executed and all one's possessions seized, it must be rather distressing."

Deng ignored his sarcasm. "Let us not deceive each other. I have come to ask your society to return the vase."

"We have not heard of any such vase," replied Wei. "But as Commander Li has encountered this difficulty, there is no reason why we shouldn't help him find it. We may possibly come across some clue to its whereabouts in a year or two."

"Commander Li said he had great respect for Master Chen. He sent me today to ask your assistance, but would not feel at ease if he was unable to do anything in return. Please do not hesitate to inform us of Master Chen's wishes."

"You are very frank, General Deng. That is excellent," Wei replied. "Our Master Chen has two wishes. Firstly, the Red Flower Society has offended Commander Li, and he would like to ask him to let bygones be bygones."

"That goes without saying. I can guarantee that the Commander will never make difficulties for your society over this matter. And the second thing?"

"Our Fourth Brother Wen Tailai is imprisoned in the Commander's Yamen."

Deng grunted.

"He is an Imperial criminal," Wei continued. "No matter how courageous Commander Li is, he would never dare to release him. We understand that. But Master Chen misses him greatly and would like to see him alone tonight."

Deng thought for a second. "This is an extremely serious matter. I will have to ask the Commander and return with the reply."

Deng returned two hours later.

"The Commander says that Master Wen's crimes are serious in the extreme, and that normally no-one would be allowed to visit him," he said.

"Normally!" Wei exclaimed.

"But as Master Chen has agreed to return the vase, the Commander will risk his neck and allow Master Chen to see him. However, there are two small conditions he must agree to. First, the Commander has recklessly agreed to this purely in order to cement his friendship with Master Chen. If anyone else found out about it, it would be disastrous."

"Commander Li wants Master Chen to agree not to reveal a word about the affair to anyone, is that it?"

"Exactly."

"I can agree to that on our Master's behalf," Wei said.

"The second point is that only Master Chen will be allowed to make the visit."

Wei smiled. "Commander Li is naturally afraid that we will take advantage of the opportunity to try to rescue Master Wen. All right, we agree. Master Chen will go by himself. But we have not agreed not to attempt a rescue."

"You are a good man, Brother Wei, and I value your word. Please ask Master Chen to come to the Yamen this evening."

"If Zhang Zhaozhong is around when Master Chen and Master Wen meet, it will naturally be impossible to preserve the secrecy of the agreement, which could be extremely inconvenient for Commander Li."

"That is true," Deng replied. "The Commander will think of some excuse for getting him away."

When Deng had left, the heroes gathered in the Great Hall to await their orders for Wen's rescue.

"Brother Xu, I will leave the arrangements to you," Chen said.

Xu was silent for a moment. "Now that we know Zhang Zhaozhong will be elsewhere and that the Great Helmsman can get inside, it will of course be much easier to rescue Brother Wen," he said. "But Li is also certain to prepare for that eventuality. We must first work out what he plans to do and then do something unexpected."

"He will gather a large contingent of troops and surround the entrance to the dungeon and may even enlist the support of some Imperial Bodyguards," Yang

pointed out. "They will allow only the Great Helmsman in, and only the Great Helmsman out."

"We had better be waiting outside the Yamen just in case the Turtles try anything against the Great Helmsman," said one of the Twin Knights.

"We will of course be waiting outside," answered Xu. "But I don't think Li will dare to harm the Great Helmsman with the vase in our hands."

"I've got it," Chen said suddenly. "When I go to see Fourth Brother, I will wear a wide cape and a large hat with a face cover..."

Xu knew what he meant. "But that way, we would gain one man only to lose another. It's not a good idea."

"Finish what you were saying, Great Helmsman," said Priest Wu Chen.

"Once I am in the dungeon, I will exchange clothes with Fourth Brother and then let him leave. The guards will think it is me. You can be waiting outside to receive him."

"But what about you?"

"The Emperor and I have a special relationship. Once they discover the switch, they will let me go."

The heroes were unhappy that their leader was placing himself in such danger, but they were forced to agree it was probably the best plan.

All the arrangements were completed. Chen threw on a large cape with the collar turned up, pulled a hat well down over his face, and set off for the Commander-in-Chief's Yamen accompanied by 'Leopard' Wei. By the time they arrived, it was already close to dusk and the first stars had begun to appear at the edge of the sky. A man came out to meet them.

"Is that Master Chen?" he whispered. Wei nodded. "Please come with me. This other gentleman, please stay here."

Wei stood and watched as Chen followed the man into the Yamen. A flight of ravens flew overhead through the evening mist on their way home, cawing as they went, and Wei's heart beat wildly as he wondered what would happen to the Great Helmsman. After a while, the rest of the heroes arrived and spread out

around the Yamen.

As he entered the gate, Chen saw the Yamen was filled with thousands of soldiers on guard. The man led him through three courtyards and into a room.

"Please take a seat," he said, and left. A moment later, Commander Li entered and saluted Chen. "It is an honour to meet you," he said.

Chen opened his cape and revealed his face. "We met the day before yesterday on the lake," he answered with a smile.

"You may now see the prisoner," said Li. "Please follow me."

As they reached the door, an attendant rushed breathlessly towards them.

"Commander, the Emperor has arrived," he reported. "Master Deng has gone out to meet him."

Li started in surprise and turned to Chen. "You had better wait here for a while," he said.

Li ran through to the front courtyard and saw Qian Long with a large contingent of Imperial Guardsmen. He hurriedly knelt down before him and kowtowed.

"Arrange a well-guarded room," said Qian Long. "I want to personally interrogate Wen Tailai."

Li invited the Emperor into his own study, and the Imperial Bodyguards established themselves on all sides of the study and even on the roof.

"I have important matters of a confidential nature to discuss with this prisoner. No-one else must hear," Qian Long told Bodyguard Bai Zhen.

"Yes, Your Highness," Bai replied and retired.

A moment later, four bodyguards entered carrying a stretcher on which Wen, handcuffed and chained, lay asleep. The bodyguards retired and there was silence for a time.

"How are your injuries?" Qian Long asked. Wen's eyes opened and he sat up. His wounds had not yet healed, but his mind was clear. He had seen Qian Long once before when he had entered the Imperial Palace with Master Yu, but was

surprised at suddenly meeting him again in Hangzhou.

"I'm not dead yet," he said coldly.

"I asked my men to invite you to come to see me because there is something I wish to discuss with you."

Wen grunted.

"When you visited me with that leader of yours, Master Yu, I discussed an important matter with him. Unfortunately, I hear he became ill and died very soon afterwards. It was a great pity."

"If Master Yu had not died, I expect he would be imprisoned here with me," replied Wen.

Qian Long laughed. "You underworld fighters, you're very frank. You say whatever you are thinking. Now, Master Wen, I have only one question for you. Answer me honestly, and I will immediately release you."

"Release me? Ha! Do you think I am a three-year-old child? I know that you cannot eat or sleep easy knowing that I'm still alive. You have stayed your hand until today only because you wish to question me."

"You're much too suspicious," said Qian Long with a smile. He walked forward two paces.

"Did Master Yu tell you what it was he talked to me about?" he asked.

"What did you talk about?"

Qian Long stared at him, and Wen returned the gaze unflinchingly. After a while, Qian Long turned his head away.

"About my origins," he said quietly.

"He didn't say. You are the Emperor, the son of the late Emperor and Empress. Everyone knows about your origins. What more is there to say?"

Qian Long breathed a sigh of relief. "That night you visited me, you must have known what the reason was?"

"Master Yu said that he had helped you once over some important matter. The Red Flower Society was short of funds and he went to ask you for three million

taels of silver. But you refused the request, and have even had me seized. If I ever get out of this, I will reveal how ungrateful you are."

Qian Long laughed out loud. He glanced at Wen: his anger did not appear to be a pretence. "If that is the case, I had better have you killed," he said, half-believing him. "Otherwise, if I let you go, it could damage my reputation."

"Why didn't you kill me earlier? If you had, you wouldn't have had to harbour such evil schemes against your mother."

"What about my mother?" Qian Long asked, turning pale.

"You understand."

"So you know everything?"

"No, not everything. Master Yu said the Empress Dowager knew he had helped you and had asked you to repay him, but that you were still unwilling to part with the silver. You have mountains of money. Three million taels should be nothing to you. But you insist on being petty."

Qian Long laughed nervously. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped away the beads of sweat on his brow. He paced the room to steady himself, then smiled. "You show no fear at all before the Emperor. You are indeed a man of steel," he said.

"What have I to be afraid of? I doubt if you would dare to kill me," said Wen.

"Wouldn't dare?"

"You want to kill me because you're afraid your secret will be revealed but as soon as you kill me, your secret will be impossible to keep."

"Can dead men talk?"

"As soon as I die, someone will open a certain letter and reveal the evidence to the world. Then you will be in a real predicament."

"What letter?" Qian Long asked.

"Before we went to the palace to see you, Master Yu wrote down every detail of the affair and sealed the document in an envelope together with two important pieces of evidence and left it with a friend."

"Was he afraid that something untoward might happen?"

"Of course. How could he trust you? Master Yu told his friend that if we were both to die suddenly, he should open the letter and do what it said, but if one of us was still alive, not to open it under any circumstances. Master Yu has already passed away, so I don't think you'll dare to kill me."

Qian Long wrung his hands, anxiety written all over his face.

"Wouldn't it be worth spending three million taels of silver to buy that letter and the two pieces of evidence?" Wen asked.

"The silver? I had always planned to hand it over and then release you. Write a letter to your friend telling him to bring the letter to me and I will immediately pay up the money."

"Ha, ha. Once I tell you his name, you can send your bodyguards to kill or capture him. Actually, I'm very comfortable here. I would be happy to stay the rest of my life. You and I have the same fate. If I die first, you won't live much longer."

Qian Long bit his lip. "If you won't write the letter, it is of no importance," he said after a pause. "I will give you two days. If you persist in being stubborn, I will have no alternative but to kill you. No-one else will know about it and your friend will think you're still alive. And even if I don't kill you, I can still have your eyes gouged out, your tongue removed, your arms cut off...Think about it over the next two days."

He pushed open the door and walked out. His bodyguards re-assembled around him, and Commander Li saw him out of the Yamen.

Wen was carried back to the dungeon by the Commander's personal guards with Zhang Zhaozhong providing an escort. Once in the cell, one of the guards handed Zhang a letter.

"Commander Li asked me to give you this," he said. Zhang opened and read the letter, then left.

Wen lay on the bed thinking about his wife and friends. He hoped none of them would be harmed if they should attempt a rescue.

Just then, the iron door to his cell opened with a clang and a man walked in. Wen thought it was Zhang returning and did not open his eyes.

The man walked over to the bed. "Fourth Brother," he said quietly.

Wen was stunned. He looked up and saw it was Chen. "Great Helmsman!" he exclaimed, sitting up.

Chen smiled and nodded. He pulled two steel files from his pocket, and began filing at Wen's manacles. After a few strong strokes, a series of light scratches appeared on the surface, but the file was ruined. The manacles were made of a specially-cast steel brought from the West, and an ordinary file was useless against it.

"Great Helmsman, only the finest of swords could break through these chains and manacles," said Wen.

Chen remembered the battle with Zhang Zhaozhong at the Yellow River crossing and how sharp Zhang's 'Frozen Emerald' sword had been.

"Does Zhang guard you night and day?" he asked quickly.

"He's never more than a step from me. He only left a short while ago."

"Good. We'll wait for him to return and steal his sword." Chen threw the files under the bed.

"It's possible I won't be able to get out of here," Wen said. "The Emperor wants to silence me because he's afraid I will reveal his secret. I had better tell you what it is, Great Helmsman, so that no matter if I live or die, there will be no delay."

Chen nodded.

"The night I went to the Imperial Palace with Master Yu, Qian Long was very surprised to see us. Master Yu said: 'A lady from the Chen family in Haining asked me to come,' and handed him a letter. The Emperor's face went pale as he read it, and he told me to wait outside. The two of them then talked for about two hours before Master Yu finally came out. On the way back, he told me the Emperor was not a Manchu at all, but a Chinese and also your elder brother."

Chen started in shock. "That's impossible," he said firmly. "My brother is in

Haining."

"Master Yu said that on the day the Emperor Yong Zheng's wife gave birth to a girl, your mother by coincidence also gave birth to a boy. Yong Zheng ordered the Chen family's child to be brought for him to look at, and when it was returned, it had become a girl. The boy is now the Emperor Qian Long..."

Before he could finish, they heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor and a guard came in.

"What is it?" asked Chen.

"Master Zhang is returning. Commander Li is unable to detain him further and asks you to leave quickly."

"Thank you," Chen replied. His left hand shot out and touched a Yuedao point on the guard's body. The guard toppled to the floor without a sound, and Chen pushed him under the bed.

"With Zhang on his way, I don't have time to give you all the details," Wen continued. "Master Yu knew the Emperor was Chinese and went to urge him to overthrow the Manchus and restore China to the Chinese while remaining as Emperor himself. Qian Long appeared moved by the appeal, and asked Master Yu to bring evidence before making a decision. But as soon as Master Yu returned home, he fell ill and never recovered. His last wish was that you should be the Great Helmsman, and he said to me that this was a good opportunity for us to restore the honour of the Chinese people. The Emperor is your elder brother. If he is unwilling to overthrow the Manchus, then everyone will support you to take his place."

His words left Chen too stunned to speak. He thought back to when he had first seen Qian Long by the lake and afterwards crying before the tomb of his parents. Could it really be that the Emperor was born of his own mother and father?

"I understand your mother wrote down the full details of how the Emperor Yong Zheng swapped the girl for your brother in a letter which Master Yu gave along with several other pieces of evidence to your teacher, Master Yuan, to look after."

"Ah, so when the Twin Knights went to see my teacher this summer, they were carrying these things to him on Master Yu's orders?"

"That's right. It was so secret that not even you could be told. All that Master Yuan knows is that they are extremely important, but he does not know what they are. Just before Master Yu passed away, he said that after you became Great Helmsman, you should open the letter and make your plans accordingly. But I stupidly allowed myself to be captured and risked the whole enterprise. Great Helmsman, if you can't get me out today, you must go to the Muslim regions as quickly as possible to see your teacher. You must not endanger the great cause of restoration just for my sake."

Wen was clearly relieved to have completed what he had to say.

He was about to add something when footsteps sounded in the corridor again. He signalled quickly with his hand, and Chen hid under the bed. Wen then draped himself over the side of bed with his head resting on the floor.

Zhang entered the cell, and under the faint light of the room's single candle, saw Wen lying half on the floor as if dead. Shocked, he leapt forward and touched Wen's back, but there was no reaction. He started to lift Wen's body back onto the bed, but as he did so, Wen leapt up and attacked him. Zhang fell back in surprise, felt a sudden numbness in his lower abdomen, and knew he had been hit by someone waiting in ambush under the bed. He roared angrily, sidestepped two paces and suppressed his breathing to control the numbness. Chen, who was startled to see Zhang still standing, leapt out from beneath the bed and struck his face with his fists seven or eight times.

If he responded, Zhang knew his control would be lost and the paralysis in his abdomen would spread. He retreated as Chen's foot flew up and struck another yuedao point. This time, he could not sustain his control. His whole body went limp and he fell to the ground.

Chen searched him and was extremely disappointed to find he did not have the Frozen Emerald sword with him. He pulled a piece of paper out of Zhang's pocket and saw under the candlelight that it was a note from Commander Li asking Zhang to show his sword to an important official who was waiting to see it: this must have been the excuse Li had used to draw Zhang away. He guessed

that Zhang had been anxious to get back to the dungeon to resume his guard duties and had left early without the sword.

Chen continued his search of Zhang's body, and suddenly leapt up jubilantly.

"What is it?" Wen asked. Chen held his hand up and displayed a set of keys. He tried one on the manacles and they opened immediately.

Finally freed, Wen exercised his arms and legs as Chen took off his cape and hat.

"Put these on and get out quickly," he said.

"What about you?"

"I'll wait here for a while. You get out."

Wen understood his meaning. "Great Helmsman, I am very grateful for your good intentions, but we cannot do it that way."

"Fourth Brother, you don't understand. I am in no danger if I stay here." He told Wen about how the Emperor and he had sworn an oath to each other.

"It is still impossible,," Wen said.

Chen frowned. "I am the Great Helmsman. All members of the Red Flower Society must follow my orders, is that not correct?"

"Of course."

"Fine. Then this my order. Put these on quickly and get out. The brothers are outside waiting for you."

"This time I am forced to disobey your order," Wen said. "I would prefer to accept whatever penalty you decide upon."

They were deadlocked. Chen pursed his lips and then had an idea.

"Well, we'll have to risk going out together then. Put on his clothes," he said pointing at Zhang.

"Excellent! Why didn't you say so earlier?" Wen exclaimed.

The two stripped Zhang of his clothes and exchanged them for Wen's, then locked the chains and manacles onto him. Zhang shook with rage, his eyes

blood-red with hate, but he was unable to utter a sound.

The two walked quietly through the door and along the corridor. As they ascended a flight of stone steps, a bright light assailed their eyes and they saw the whole courtyard was filled with torches. Several dozen soldiers stood with shining spear tips pointed at the dungeon entrance. Behind them were several hundred archers with bows drawn. Commander Li stood with his right hand held high. Once it dropped, the spears and arrows would be loosed, and Chen and Wen would be dead.

Chen stepped back a pace. "How are your wounds?" he whispered to Wen. "Can you charge through?"

"No, my leg is not up to it," Wen replied with a rueful smile. "You go by yourself, Great Helmsman, don't worry about me."

"All right, pretend you're Zhang and we'll see how we do," Chen replied.

Wen pulled his cap down to his eyebrows and strode out. Commander Li's heart sank at the sight of Zhang and Chen together and he assumed that Zhang had arrested him. He turned to his daughter Yuanzhi.

"Give Zhang's sword back to him and distract him so that Chen can get away," he said.

Yuanzhi walked over with the 'Frozen Emerald' sword in her hand and held it out to Wen, positioning herself between the two men.

"Uncle Zhang, here is your sword," she said, giving Chen a slight nudge with her elbow. Wen grunted and moved to accept the sword, and suddenly under the torch light she recognized him.

"Wen Tailai! So you're trying to escape," she cried and thrust the sword at his chest.

Wen feinted to one side and caught the blade with his fingers while his right hand struck out at the Solar Yuedao points on her forehead. Frightened, Yuanzhi tried to retreat a step, but found that with his fingers still holding the sword, she was unable to move an inch. She let go of the sword and tried to slip away, but Wen struck her left shoulder and a bone-splitting pain surged through her. She cried out and squatted down. Looking back, Chen saw Wen was surrounded but

he continued to fight fiercely.

"Stop or the archers will shoot," Commander Li roared.

The old wounds on Wen's thigh burst open with the sudden effort and blood poured out. He knew he did not have the strength to break out of the circle of soldiers.

"Great Helmsman, catch the sword and get out!" he shouted. He tried to throw the Frozen Emerald Sword, but with a sudden pain in his shoulder, his hand went limp and the sword fell to the ground only a few feet from him. He had been hit by an arrow.

Chen turned to Commander Li. "Stop shooting!" he shouted. Li waved his hand and the archers stopped.

"Get a doctor quickly to deal with Master Wen's wounds. I'm going," Chen said, and raced out of the Yamen. Following Li's orders, the guards pretended to give chase, without really obstructing him.

Once out of the Yamen, 'Leopard' Wei and Luo Bing came up to meet him. Chen smiled bitterly and shook his head. The eastern sky was already pale as with heavy hearts the heroes returned home.

They gathered later in the Great Hall to discuss the situation.

Chen said to Wei: "Ninth Brother, send the vase to Commander Li. We cannot betray our word." Wei bowed and left.

Master Ma's son entered the hall and walked over to Chen. "Great Helmsman, Zhang Zhaozhong has sent a letter to you," He said.

"Zhang? That is strange. I wonder what he has to say?"

He opened the letter and found it angrily accused him of deception and plotting, of behaviour unbefitting an honourable man, and challenged him to a duel at a time and place of his choice. "He wants to get revenge for last night," Chen told the others. "Huh, a duel! Does he think I'm scared?"

"We have to rescue Fourth Brother in the next two days," said Xu. "Why don't you ask Zhang to postpone the meeting for a few days? We should not allow this

matter to interfere with our real purpose."

"That is true," said Chen. "Today is the twentieth, so I will set the meeting for noon on the twenty-third."

He immediately wrote a letter inviting Zhang to meet him alone on that day and ordered an attendant to take it to the Commander-in-Chief's Yamen.

An attendant entered and said to Master Ma: "Master, the old man Wang Weiyang still refuses to eat and does nothing but curse."

"Who does he curse?" Ma asked.

"The Imperial Bodyguard for their lack of sense. He says he doesn't understand why they have imprisoned him."

"The North China Earth-Shaker," Priest Wu Chen chuckled. "As soon as he comes down to the south, he has to put up with some hardship."

Xu's face suddenly brightened. "I have a plan that should make it easier for you to deal with Zhang, Great Helmsman," he said. He told them the plan and they all clapped and laughed in delight.

"Excellent, very cunning," said Priest Wu Chen. Zhou Qi smiled and shook her head.

"Mistress Zhou once again thinks that Seventh Brother is not being straightforward enough," Chen said with a smile. "But when dealing with dishonourable men, one does not have to be completely honourable. Brother Meng, go and have a talk with the North China Earth-Shaker."

In forty years, Wang Weiyang had never suffered a setback. Now, on his first trip to the south, he was in dire straights. He yelled and shouted, insisting that he should be allowed to see the Imperial Guard Commander to settle the matter. As he ranted, the door to his cell opened and Meng walked in wearing the uniform of an Imperial Guard officer.

"So you are the North China Earth-Shaker?" he said unceremoniously.

Wang raged inwardly. "Yes," he said. "It is a nickname given to me by my friends. If Commander Fu finds it unpleasing, I will change it immediately."

"Commander Fu is a confidante of the Emperor," said Meng coldly. "He has

no interest in such things."

"I am escorting a quantity of precious articles to Hangzhou for the court. Why are you detaining me here?"

"Do you really want to know?"

"Of course!"

"I am just afraid that at your age, you may not be able to stand the shock."

Wang hated references to his age more than anything. In a rage, he struck the corner of the table with his fist and splinters flew.

"I may be old, but my heart is still strong," he shouted. "What shock have I to be afraid of?"

Meng laughed. "You're truly remarkable, Master Wang. There is a saying in the fighting community. 'Meeting the Devil is preferable to meeting old Wang, bumping into a spear is preferable to bumping into Zhang Zhaozhong', isn't that right?"

"That's the reputation I have amongst bandits."

"Why does 'old Wang' come before 'Zhang'? Could it be that old Wang's kung fu is better than Zhang's?"

Wang stood up. "Aha!" he exclaimed. "So the Fire Hand Judge wants to test me. I'm getting too slow in my old age. I never thought of that."

"Master Zhang is my superior, did you know that?"

"I knew that Master Zhang was in the Imperial Guard."

"Would you recognize him?" asked Meng.

"We both live in Beijing, But he is an official and I am an ordinary citizen. I have heard much about him, but have never had the good fortune to meet him."

"Master Zhang has also heard much about you," said Meng. "He says there are three matters he wants to raise with you. If you agree to them, you will be allowed to leave immediately."

"Well?"

"Firstly, he wants you to abandon the nickname 'North China Earth-Shaker.'"

"Huh! What's the second thing?"

"Please close down the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency."

"My Bodyguard Agency has been operating for more than thirty years," Wang protested angrily. "Never have I suffered a loss at the hands of our friends in the fighting community, yet Master Zhang wants me to retire! And the third thing?"

"The third thing is to ask you to issue a proclamation asking members of the fighting community to reverse the order of the saying about you and Master Zhang. Master Zhang also says that as you are now getting on in age, your Eight Diagrams sword is probably no longer of much use to you, and suggests that you donate it to the Imperial Guard."

Wang's anger surged. "Zhang Zhaozhong and I have nothing against one another. He's carrying this too far!" he shouted.

"You have enjoyed a great name for forty years. Perhaps you ought to retire. As the saying goes, one mountain cannot contain two tigers. Surely you understand the sense of that?"

"So he wishes to humiliate me to promote his own name. Huh! And what if I don't agree. Will he continue to hold me here?"

"Master Zhang is an honourable man. He would not do such a thing," said Meng. "He invites you to duel with him at noon today on Lion Peak. If you win, the three conditions will not be mentioned again. If you lose, then he asks you to agree to all three. He says it would be rather inconvenient if the Emperor found out about this, and asks you to go alone. That is, if you dare."

Wang spluttered with rage. "Even if I was to die there, I would still go alone."

"Then please write out a letter and I will take it back to Master Zhang," said Meng. He pulled out some paper and a writing brush.

Wang, his hand shaking in anger, wrote out a short note:

"To His Excellency Master Zhang Zhaozhong. Your words and behaviour have gone too far. I will meet you today at noon on Lion Peak. If I lose, I will be at your disposal. Wang Weiyang."

Meng smiled, picked up the letter and walked out, closing the door of the cell behind him.

That morning, Master Han, the original owner of the white horse, was moved from one cell to another. Having fallen into the hands of Red Flower Society once again, he was afraid he would not be able to escape so easily again. As he morosely considered his dilemma, he heard someone shouting in the cell next to his, and recognized the voice of Wang Weiyang. He could hear he was cursing Zhang Zhaozhong. Greatly curious, he was just about to call out to Wang when the door opened and two men walked in.

"Please come with us to the Great Hall for a chat, Master Han," one of them said.

As they entered the hall, Han saw three men sitting on the left. In the middle was the Red Flower Society's Great Helmsman Chen, while on either side of him sat a dwarf and a man with a flowing white beard. Han bowed silently and sat down.

"Brother Han, I never thought that we would meet again here," said Chen. "Our fates seem to be tied."

Han hesitated for a moment. "I know I agreed to give up my sword and return home," he said finally. "But Master Wang insisted that I do this job. Out of feelings of friendship and because I knew the valuables belonged to your family, I..."

"Brother Han," Xu interrupted harshly. "We of the fighting community are very particular about two things: trust and honour. By your own word, you have proved to be untrustworthy. How do you think you should be dealt with?"

Han steeled himself. "What is there to say? If you're going to kill me then kill me."

"There's no need to talk like that," Chen said. "Master Wang has been grossly insulted by Zhang Zhaozhong, and says that no matter what, he must fight it out with him. We of the fighting community are very annoyed over this affair. What is your relationship with Zhang Zhaozhong?"

"I've met him a few times in Beijing, but we are from two different worlds.

You couldn't say we had any relationship."

"As I thought. Have a look at this letter," said Chen, and handed him the note Wang had written.

Han knew that Wang always showed the greatest respect for officialdom. But if Zhang really had been that insulting, he would have been unable to swallow it. Having himself heard Wang cursing and now seeing the letter, there was no room for doubt.

"I would like to see Master Wang and discuss the situation with him," he said.

"There is not enough time," Chen replied. "I would like you to take this letter to Zhang now and you can see Master Wang when you return. Twelfth Brother, please come here," he called. 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi emerged from an inner chamber and Chen introduced him to Han. "Brother Shi will accompany you to see Zhang Zhaozhong. You are unaware of how Zhang has caused Master Wang to lose face, but there is no time to give you the details now. When you see Zhang, you can say that Brother Shi here is a lead escort with the bodyguard agency. Do exactly as he says."

Han's suspicions rose again and he hesitated once more.

"Do you have any doubts, Brother Han?"

"No, no," he answered hastily.

Xu knew that Han suspected. "Please wait a moment," he said. He left the hall for a moment, returning with a flask of wine and a wine cup into which he poured some wine.

"I was too abrupt in what I said just now," he said, offering the cup to Han. "Please accept this as a token of my apology. Let there be no hard feelings."

"Well said!" Han replied. He drained the cup, picked up the letter and walked towards the door.

"Oh no!" Xu suddenly exclaimed. "Brother Han, I've made a mistake. That cup of wine had poison in it!"

Han went pale, and he turned back towards them.

"I am truly sorry," said Xu. "That flask was poisoned for use whenever needed

and one of the servants gave it to me by mistake. I didn't realize it until I smelt it. You've already drunk a cupful. Brother Han, oh dear, oh dear. Get the antidote quickly," he added to an attendant.

"The antidote is in the east city residence," the attendant replied.

"You fool. Ride over there and get it!" Xu shouted at him. The attendant bowed and left.

"I have been neglectful," Xu said apologetically to Han. "Please deliver the letter first. If you do exactly as Brother Shi says, you can take the antidote when you get back, and everything will be fine."

Han knew he either did as the Red Flower Society ordered or he was a dead man. He gave Xu a look of hatred, then turned and walked out without a word. Shi followed him.

Lord Zhou frowned as the two left. "Han doesn't appear to me to be all that evil," he said. "Poisoning him like that was not a very honourable thing to do."

"But there was no poison in the wine," Xu replied.

"No poison?"

"None." Xu poured himself a cup and drank it down.

"I was afraid he might mess up our plan in front of Zhang, so I scared him a little. When he comes back, he can drink another cup and it will all be over."

The others laughed.

Zhang was sitting beside Wen Tailai keeping watch when the cell door opened and a guard came in with a visiting card inscribed with the words: 'North China Earth-Shaker Wang Weiyang.'

"Go and tell him that I cannot see visitors," he said.

The guard left, but returned a moment later to say: "The visitors won't leave. They have a letter for you."

Zhang read the letter, and was both angered and perplexed by it. He had never had any disputes with Wang and wondered why the old man should challenge him to a kung fu duel.

"Tell Commander Li that I have to see a visitor and ask him to send someone to stand watch in my place," he said to the guard.

Four bodyguards arrived to replace him, and Zhang went to the reception hall. He recognized Lead Escort Han and saluted him with his fists.

"Isn't Master Wang here?" he asked.

"This is Lead Escort Shi of our bodyguard agency," Han replied, pointing to his companion. "There are a number of things Master Wang wants him to say to you."

Zhang threw Wang's letter onto the table. "I have respected Wang from afar for a long time, but I have never had any dealings with him whatsoever," he said. "How can he say that my words and behaviour have gone too far? There appears to be some misunderstanding here."

"Master Wang is a leading member of the fighting community," said Shi coldly. "When the community produces scum, he considers it to be his business regardless of whether there is a direct connection."

Zhang stood up, absolutely furious. "So Wang Weiyang says I am scum, does he?"

Shi said nothing in silent confirmation.

"Please enlighten me as to just how I have dishonoured the fighting community," demanded Zhang.

"Members of the fighting community abhor disrespect for superiors above all else," Shi replied. "You, Master Zhang, are a senior member of the Wudang School. It is said that you have not only turned hostile towards your own martial brothers, but have also attempted to arrest one of them for the Manchu court. Is this true?"

"The affairs of my martial brothers and I are of no concern to anyone else," Zhang said angrily.

"Secondly, there is no personal enmity between yourself and the Red Flower Society and yet purely for the purpose of your own career and enrichment, you seized Master Wen Tailai, and caused the death of the young son of Lord Zhou

of Iron Gall Manor. Is your mind at ease over such things?"

"I am employed by the Emperor and I am loyal to him. What has that got to do with the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency?"

"Did you not work to implicate the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency in your schemes, as a result of which many of our men were killed and wounded?" said Shi.

"You really did do wrong there, Master Zhang," Han added. "You can't blame Master Wang for being angry."

"We will ignore other examples for the moment," Shi continued coldly. "How do you think these three questions should be handled?" He rolled up his eyes and struck an expression of dignified authority.

Zhang was incensed at being treated like a criminal in the dock. "All right, you," he shouted, striding forward. "You're obviously looking for trouble!"

Shi retreated a pace. "What's this?" he asked. "You want to take me on because you don't dare to accept the North China Earth-Shaker's challenge, is that it?"

"Who says I don't dare?" Zhang roared. "I will be there on Lion Peak at noon today."

"If you decide not to go, then never again consider yourself to be a member of the fighting community," Shi said. "Master Wang says that if you have any guts at all, you will go alone. There will be no one else from the Bodyguard Agency there."

"Why should I need help? Do you think I am afraid of this egotistical, stupid old man?"

"Master Wang is not a great orator," Shi continued, ignoring Zhang's comment. "When you meet him, the issue will be decided by kung fu alone. If you want to curse and swear, please feel free to do so now."

Zhang was speechless with rage.

Shi laughed coldly, then turned on his heel and left with Han following.

While the two had argued, Han's mind had been on the poison he had taken, and wished that Shi would hurry up and finish so that he could get back and

take the antidote.

"We agreed to meet at noon," Shi reported on their return to the mansion at Solitary Peak.

Han collapsed on a chair with what appeared to be stomach cramps. Xu poured out a cup of wine and handed it to him.

"This is the antidote. Drink it up, Brother Han."

Han quickly stretched out his hand to take it, but Lord Zhou snatched the cup away first and drank it down at one draught. Han stared at him in amazement.

"We have joked with you enough, Master Han," Zhou said with a smile. "You didn't take any poison at all. He was just playing with you. Master Xu, come and apologise."

Xu walked over, grinning and bowed. "Please forgive me, Brother Han," he said.

Meng went in once more to see Wang Weiyang. "Master Zhang has agreed," he said. "You can go now. And by the way, he does not like naggers, so if you have anything to say, say it now. When you get to Lion Peak, the matter will be decided with fists and blades. If you try talking to him even to beg for mercy, I doubt if he will listen to you. If you are afraid, there is still time to pull out."

"I am prepared to die today if need be," Wang shouted, huffily stroking his beard. He stood up and strode out. Meng motioned with his hands to an attendant who handed Wang his sword and a bag of projectiles.

Han was standing by the door. "Please be careful Master Wang," he said.

"You know about this too?"

Han nodded. "I have seen Zhang."

"What did he call me?"

"It was demeaning. You would not wish to hear it."

"Speak," ordered Wang.

"He called you ... an egotistical, stupid old man."

Wang grunted. "We shall see whether or not I am egotistical. Brother Han, if

anything should happen to me, please look after the agency and the affairs of my family for me." He hesitated. "And tell my two sons not to rush into taking revenge. Their kung fu is still not good enough, and they would lose their lives to no good purpose."

He then started out for Lion Peak and the duel.

Chapter 6

After two days and nights of being starved, frightened and angered, Qian Long's resistance was virtually worn away. On the morning of the third day, a boy appeared and said: "Master Dongfang, our master invites you to come and talk with him."

Qian Long recognized the boy as Chen's attendant, and he followed him down to the floor below.

As he entered, Chen, smiling broadly, advanced to greet him, and bowed. Qian Long returned the bow, and the two sat down. Xin Yan served some tea.

"Bring some titbits to eat," Chen ordered. A moment later, Xin Yan carried in a tray on which was placed plates of spring rolls, prawns, chicken and ham. He set out two sets of bowls and chopsticks and poured wine for them both.

"Please forgive me for not being able to see you sooner. I had to go to visit a friend who was wounded," said Chen.

"It is nothing."

"There is something I wish to talk to you about, but please eat first," Chen added. He chose a morsel from each plate, then put down his chopsticks and watched Qian Long wolf down the food.

When he had finished, Qian Long sat back, unspeakably contented, and raised his tea cup. He looked closely at the tiny Dragon's Well tea leaves and took a leisurely sip, savouring the feeling of the liquid seeping into his stomach.

Chen walked over to the door and pushed it open. "All the others are downstairs standing guard. There could not be a more convenient place for us to talk. No one will hear us," he said.

Qian Long's expression hardened. "Why did you have me brought here?" he asked. "What is it you want?"

Chen stepped forward and stared into his face.

"Do you still not recognize me, brother?" Chen asked after a moment's silence. The words were soft, the tone intimate, but they hit Qian Long's ears with the force of a clap of thunder, and he jumped. An expression of deep sincerity on

his face, Chen slowly extended his hand and took Qian Long's.

"We are blood brothers," he said. "There is no need to continue the deception, my brother, I know everything."

Chen pulled on a chord beside a painting hanging on the wall and the painting rolled up to reveal a mirror. "Take a look at yourself," he said.

Qian Long stood up and gazed at himself in the mirror, wearing Chinese clothes: his face contained not the slightest likeness to a Manchu. He looked at Chen standing beside him, and had to admit that despite their difference in age, their faces were similar. He sighed and sat down.

"Brother, we were not aware of the situation before," said Chen. "We even took up arms against each other. The spirits of father and mother up in heaven must have been heartbroken. Luckily neither of us was hurt and nothing happened which cannot be rectified."

Qian Long felt a rasping dryness in his throat and his heart beating rapidly. A moment passed. "I asked you to go to Beijing with me to work, but you refused," he said finally. Chen turned and gazed out at the great river without answering.

"With your scholastic abilities," Qian Long continued, "what reason would there be for not promoting you? Such a situation would be of great benefit to our family and to the nation, to both you and I. Why be so disloyal and unfilial as to continue with this criminal course of action?"

Chen spun round. "I have never accused you of being disloyal or unfilial, or of acting criminally, and yet you accuse me of these things."

"Hah!" replied Qian Long. "It is true that ministers must be completely loyal to their emperor. But since I am already emperor, how could I be disloyal?"

"You are obviously a Chinese and yet you submit to the Manchus. Is that loyalty? When our father and mother were alive, you never attended to them properly. Is that filial behaviour?"

Beads of sweat dripped off Qian Long's forehead. "At the time, I did not know," he said quietly. "I first heard about it when the former leader of your Red Flower Society, Master Yu, visited me last spring. Even now, I'm not sure

whether I believe it."

"Look at yourself," Chen said. "What resemblance is there to a Manchu? How can you have any further doubt?"

Qian Long brooded in silence.

"You are Chinese. The homeland of the Chinese people has fallen into the hands of the Manchus, and you yourself lead them in the oppression of our people. Is that not disloyal, unfilial and criminal behaviour?"

For a moment, Qian Long was at a loss for a reply. "And now I have fallen into your hands," he finally said, haughtily. "If you are going to kill me, then kill me. There is no point wasting words."

"But we made a pact on the embankment at Haining that we would never do anything to hurt one other," Chen replied softly. "How can I go back on my word? And anyway, now that we know we are blood brothers, we have even less reason to do each other harm." A tear trickled unbidden down his cheek.

"Well, what do you want me to do? Do you want to force me to abdicate?"

"No," said Chen, wiping his eyes. "You can continue to be emperor. But as the wise, enlightened founder of a new dynasty."

"Founder of a new dynasty?" Qian Long echoed in surprise.

"Yes. You will be a Chinese emperor, not an emperor of the Manchus."

Qian Long suddenly understood. "So you want me to drive out the Manchus?" he said.

"Yes, you will be emperor just the same, but instead of being regarded as a criminal and cursed by future generations, why not establish an outstanding and rejuvenating dynasty that will last?"

Chen saw from Qian Long's expression that his words were having the desired effect.

"Being the emperor you are at present, you are simply basking in the glory of the former Manchu rulers," he continued. "What is so special about that? Look at that man."

Qian Long went over to the window and looked down in the direction Chen was pointing, and saw a peasant in the distance hoeing the ground.

"If that man had been born in the Imperial Palace and you had been born in his farm house, he would be emperor, and you would have no choice but to hoe the field."

Qian Long started at the novelty of the idea.

"A man is born into the world and his life is gone in a flash," said Chen. "If you achieve nothing worthwhile, you decay and rot like grass and trees without leaving a trace behind. The emperors of the past who established their own noble dynasties were truly great men. Even a Tartar such as Genghis Khan could also be considered to be outstanding."

Every word stabbed deep into Qian Long's heart. If, he thought, if I really do as he says and throw the Manchus out and restore the Chinese homelands, I would truly be the founder of a dynasty and a man of greater achievements than any emperor before me.

Just as he was considering an answer, he heard the sound of dogs barking in the distance. Seeing Chen frown slightly, he looked out and spied four massive hounds galloping towards the pagoda with two figures following.

In the wink of an eye, they reached the base of the pagoda and there was a sharp challenge from below. Qian Long and Chen, in the second-highest storey of the thirteen-storey pavilion could not hear distinctly what was said, but they saw the two new-comers and their dogs charge into the pavilion. A moment later, there was a loud whistle indicating danger.

Seeing help had arrived, Qian Long was overjoyed. Chen looked around carefully, but could see no other signs of movement: the two intruders were alone.

He heard the shouts of youngsters mingling with the barks and growls of the dogs, indicating Zhou Qi and Xin Yan on the second floor were doing battle with the animals. All of a sudden, there were two screams, and two swords were hurled out of the window. Just then, 'Crocodile' Jiang wielding his mighty iron oar chased the four dogs out of the pagoda and began beating them mercilessly. Someone on the sixth floor and gave an ear-splitting whistle. The four dogs

turned and raced away.

Noting the intruders had reached the sixth floor, Chen realised it meant Twelfth Brother, Ninth Brother and Eighth Brother had been unable to stop them. He groaned inwardly.

Suddenly, he saw 'Mastermind' Xu leap out of the seventh floor window onto the narrow roof pursued by a tiny old woman with a head of white hair and a sword slung over her back.

"Watch the dart!" Xu yelled with a wave of his hand, and his opponent hastily withdrew. But it had been merely a feint, and Xu took advantage of the trick to escape round the corner.

The old woman chased after him.

"Watch out!" Xu yelled.

"You bastard monkey," the old woman cursed. "You can't fool your grandma again."

She made a grab for him, but this time, it was no feint: a piece of tile Xu had picked up from the roof hurtled towards her. Unable to avoid it, the old woman blocked the tile with her hand and it shattered. The Twin Knights, standing guard on the eighth floor, appeared to be fully occupied dealing with the old woman's partner, for they gave Xu no help. Xu's kung fu was no match for the old woman's, and after a few moves, he was forced to dodge out of the way again.

Qian Long watched with pleasure as the two new-comers fought their way up, but Chen also seemed strangely unconcerned. He pulled a chair to the window so that he could sit and observe the battle. There were only two of them, he thought. In the end, they could not overcome all the Red Flower Society's fighters.

Then he heard the sound of more dogs barking in the distance intermingled with shouting and galloping horses.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs and Xin Yan raced in.

"The guards outside report that more than two thousand Manchu troops are

approaching, heading straight for us," he told Chen, using the Red Flower Society's secret language.

Chen nodded and Xin Yan raced back downstairs. Qian Long did not understand what Xin Yan had said, but seeing Chen's anxious expression, he knew it was unwelcome news. He looked into the distance and spotted amongst the maple trees a white flag on which was written one large word: "Li". Overjoyed, he realized Commander Li had come to save him.

Chen leaned out of the window and shouted: "Brother Ma, retreat into the pagoda and prepare the bows and arrows!"

Suddenly the old woman rushed into the room with the heroes close behind. Lord Zhou attacked her with his great sword while Chen pulled Qian Long into a corner.

Xu motioned some of the others to guard the windows, and Chen shouted: "Throw down your sword and we'll spare you!"

The old woman could see she was surrounded, but she continued to fight, completely unafraid.

"I've seen her sword style somewhere before, I'm sure," Zhou Qi said to Xu.

"Yes, I thought it was familiar too," he replied.

The old woman forced Lord Zhou back a pace, then shouted at Qian Long: "Are you the emperor?"

"Yes, I'm the emperor," he replied hastily. "Are all the rescue forces here?" The woman leapt onto the table, then with her sword pointing straight out, flew at him like a great bird, thrusting the blade at his heart. The heroes had assumed she was one of Qian Long's underlings come to rescue him, and were caught completely unaware by this fast move. But Chen, who was standing by Qian Long's side, thrust his fingers at a Yuedao point on the old woman's arm. Her blade slowed, giving Chen time to draw his dagger and place it in the way of the sword. The two blades clashed, then both retreated two paces. Chen pulled Qian Long back and placed himself in front of him, then saluted.

"What is your honourable name, Madame," he asked.

"Where did that dagger of yours come from?" she replied.

Chen was surprised by the question. "A friend gave it to me," he said.

"What friend?" the woman demanded. "You are a servant of the Emperor. Why would she give it to you? What is your relationship with Master Yuan, the Strange Knight of the Heavenly Pool?"

"He is my teacher," said Chen, answering the last question first.

"So that's it," the woman said. "Your teacher may be peculiar, but he's an upright gentleman. How could you have dishonoured him by becoming a running dog of the Manchus?"

"This is our Great Helmsman, Master Chen," 'Iron Pagoda' Yang shouted. "Don't talk such nonsense."

The old woman's face took on a puzzled expression. "Are you the Red Flower Society?" she asked.

"Correct," said Yang.

She turned on Chen. "Have you surrendered to the Manchus?" she screeched in rage.

"The Red Flower Society is just and upright. How could we bend our knees before the Manchu court?" he replied. "Please sit down, madame. Let us discuss this calmly."

Her expression softened slightly. "Where did your dagger come from?" she asked again.

Having seen her kung fu style, and hearing her questions, Chen had already almost solved the puzzle.

"It was given to me by a Muslim friend," he said. The exchange of presents between boys and girls was not an ordinary thing, and Chen was unhappy about discussing the matter in front of everyone.

"Do you know Huo Qingtong?" the old woman demanded. Chen nodded.

"It was Sister Huo Qingtong who gave it to him," Zhou Qi interjected. "Do you know her? If you do, we're all on the same side!"

"She is my pupil," the old woman said. "Since you say we are all on the same side, what are you doing helping the Emperor, and stopping me from killing him?"

"We caught the Emperor," said one of the Twin Knights. "If he is to be killed, it will not be you who does it."

"Huh!" the woman exclaimed. "You mean you caught the emperor and brought him here?"

"This is a misunderstanding, Madame," said Chen. "We invited the Emperor to come here. We assumed you were palace bodyguards coming to rescue him, that is why we tried to obstruct you."

The old woman went over to the window and stuck her head out. "Come down, husband!" she shouted at the top of her voice. An arrow shot in through the window from below and the old woman grabbed it by its tail, then turned in one movement and threw the arrow so that it implanted itself in the table top.

"You untrustworthy rascal," she screeched at Chen as the arrow quivered. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Please don't be angry Madame," replied Chen hastily. "Our brothers at the base of the pagoda are not yet aware of the situation." He walked to the window planning to tell the heroes to stop firing and saw that the pagoda was already surrounded by Manchu troops.

"Third Brother," he said to 'Buddha' Zhao. "Tell the others to guard the doorway, but not to go outside." Zhao nodded and went downstairs.

"You must be Madame Guan," said Lord Zhou to the old woman. "I have long respected you."

Madame Guan nodded slightly.

"This is Lord Zhou Zhongying," said Chen to her.

"Ah, I have heard about you too," she said, then suddenly screeched out: "Husband, come down! What are you doing?"

The others all jumped at this unexpected outburst.

"Your husband is fighting with Priest Wu Chen," said Lord Zhou. "Let's go

and explain the situation to them quickly."

Chen motioned to the Twin Knights to guard Qian Long, and the rest raced up the stairs to the thirteenth floor.

"Husband!" Madame Guan shouted. "They're the Red Flower Society!"

Her husband Bald Vulture, locked in fierce combat with the Taoist priest, started in surprise, and hesitated in his attack. "Really?" he said.

There was a laugh from above their heads and Master Lu Feiqing dropped to the floor.

"Excellent swordsmanship, excellent," he chuckled, nodding appreciatively at both Bald Vulture and at Priest Wu Chen.

"Do you recognize me?" he asked Bald Vulture.

Bald Vulture looked at him closely for a moment, then gave a shout.

"Ah! You're 'Hidden Needle' Lu," he exclaimed.

"That's right," Lu smiled.

"What are you doing here?" Bald Vulture asked.

Lu turned without answering and bowed before the old woman. "Madame, it has been many years since I last saw you, but your kung fu is better than ever!"

"Ah," exclaimed Bald Vulture again, staring at Lu's blade. "That's a very precious sword you have there!"

Lu smiled. "It belongs to someone else," he said. "I'm just using it temporarily." But let me introduce you. He introduced all the heroes, to 'Bald Vulture' Lin and his wife Madame Guan, the Tianshan Twin Eagles.

"I thought you two were living happily in the Tianshan mountains," Lu said. "And here you are, trying to kill the Emperor."

"You have all met my young pupil, Huo Qingtong," replied Madame Guan. "This affair started with her. The Emperor sent an army to attack the Muslims, but they couldn't match the Manchu troops' strength and lost some battles. Later, the Manchu grain supplies were ransacked..."

"That was the Red Flower Society," interrupted Lu. "They did it to help

Muzhuolun."

"Mm, I heard about that," said Madame Guan. She glanced at Chen. "No wonder she gave you that dagger."

"That was before. We met when they came to recover their sacred Koran."

"You also helped to get that back. The way the Muslims talk of you, you're all great heroes!" Her tone suggested she disagreed. "After the Manchu troops lost their grain, they also lost a battle and Muzhuolun suggested peace talks. But just as the truce talks were getting started, the Manchu general got hold of some rations and attacked again."

"Manchu officers have no sense of honour," said Lu, shaking his head sagely.

"The ordinary people of the Muslim areas have been brutally treated by the Manchu troops," Madame Guan continued. "Master Muzhuolun asked us to help. We originally didn't want to have anything to do with it...."

"It was you!" Bald Vulture butted in accusingly. "Now you're trying to feign innocence."

"What do you mean, me? Look at the way the Manchus are burning and pillaging across the Muslim lands, oppressing the people. Don't you care?"

Bald Vulture grunted in indignation and was about to argue further when Lu raised his hand.

"You two are just the same as ever," he said with a smile. "As soon as you open your mouths, you're arguing. Don't take any notice, Madame, please continue."

She eyed her husband distastefully, then said: "We first thought of assassinating the Manchu general, Zhao Wei, but there wasn't much point in killing one general, because the Emperor would just send another and it would go on for ever. So we decided to kill the Emperor instead. We went to Beijing, but heard on the road that he had come down south. We followed him out of Hangzhou with our dogs using the tunnel you used to bring him here. At the time, we were very puzzled as to why the Emperor would suddenly want to travel around in tunnels."

"What? So you captured the Emperor?" said Bald Vulture. Chen nodded. "You did pretty well," Bald Vulture commented.

Suddenly, there was a roar from the Manchu troops around the base of the pagoda.

"I'll go and tell the Emperor to shut them up," said Xu, and ran downstairs. A moment later they saw Qian Long stick his head out of the window on the seventh floor and shout: "I'm here!"

"There's His Highness!" called Bai Zhen down below and the troops all prostrated themselves on the ground.

"I am all right up here!" Qian Long added. "There is no need for such noise." There was a pause, then he added: "All of you retire thirty paces!" They complied immediately.

"Seventh Brother directs the Emperor and the Emperor directs the troops," said Chen with a smile. "That's much better than charging out and killing and slaughtering. The Emperor is the most precious object under heaven. It is better to use him than to kill him." The others laughed.

'Leopard' Wei, who was watching the Manchu soldiers withdraw, saw several men in their midst with hunting dogs on leashes.

"Ah, I was wondering how they found their way here," he said. He took a bow from one of the attendants, and shot off two arrows, and there were two long screams and two of the dogs fell to the ground, dead. A roar went up from the Manchu troops, who speeded up their retreat.

"Master Lu, Lord Zhou," said Chen. "Please entertain the Twin Eagles while I go downstairs and have another talk with the Emperor."

As Chen reached the seventh floor, the Twin Knights and Xu bowed to him and retired. Qian Long was sitting despondently in a chair.

"Have you made a decision yet?" asked Chen.

"Since you have caught me, you might as well kill me if you are going to. What is the point of talking?"

Chen sighed. "It is such a pity," he said.

"What's a pity?"

"I have always thought of you as an extremely talented man and have pride in the fact my parents gave birth to such a good son, my brother. But..."

"But what?"

Chen was silent for a moment. "But although outwardly you appear to be a man of courage, you are virtually hollow inside. Not being afraid of death is the easiest thing in the world. But the formation of a grand designs, the making of great decisions, that is something that can only be done by a man with true courage. That is precisely what you are incapable of doing."

Qian Long was silent, but he appeared to be moved by Chen's words.

"All you have to do is to decide to restore the Chinese nation and we unruly fighters will immediately follow your every instruction," Chen added. "I can strike my chest and guarantee that they will not dare to do anything disrespectful towards you."

Qian Long nodded several times, but there was still an area of doubt in his mind which made it impossible for him to speak out. Chen guessed his thoughts.

"All I want is to see you throw the barbarian Manchus out of China," he said. "Then I will be content," he said. "Then I will ask you to allow me to retire to the seclusion of the Western Lake and live out the rest of my life in peace."

"What sort of talk is that?" said Qian Long. "If this Grand Design was achieved, your assistance would be required in planning affairs of state."

"We are getting ahead of ourselves," replied Chen. "But once the Grand Design has been completed, you must allow me to retire."

Qian Long slapped his hand down on the table. "All right," he said. "We'll do as you say."

Chen was overjoyed. "You have no further doubts?" he asked.

"None. But there is one thing I would like you to do for me. Your former Great Helmsman, Yu Wanting, had several items stored in the Muslim areas and said they were proof of my birth. Go and get them so that I can see them. Only

then will my last doubts disappear. Then we will discuss detailed plans."

Chen felt this was reasonable. "All right," he replied. "I will start out tomorrow and get them myself."

"When you get back, I will assign you to the Imperial Bodyguard, then promote you to be commander of the Beijing garrison," said Qian Long. "I will gradually transfer the military power in every province into the hands of Chinese we can trust. I'll make you Secretary of the Armed Forces with orders to disperse the key Manchu Banner units, and then we can act."

Chen knelt down and performed the ritual act of obeisance of a vassal before his Lord, but Qian Long hurriedly helped him up.

"An oath must be sworn in front of the others over this," Chen said. "There must be no reneging."

Qian Long nodded.

Chen clapped his hands once and ordered Xin Yan to help Qian Long change back into his original clothes.

"Please ask everyone to come to pay their respects to the Emperor," he said.

The heroes crowded in. Chen told them Qian Long had agreed to chase out the Manchus and restore the Chinese throne, then swore in a clear voice: "In future, we will assist Your Highness, and together plan the Grand Design. If anyone should reveal this secret, he will be damned by heaven and earth."

He drank a draught of a specially prepared brew of Covenant Wine to seal the pact, and Qian Long did likewise.

"Bald Vulture, Madame Guan," said Lu. "Come and drink a cup of the Covenant Wine as well."

"I have never believed the word of any official, so why should I trust their leader?" said Bald Vulture.

His right hand suddenly struck the wall, smashing a section of it to rubble and pulled out a brick. "Whoever breaks the covenant, betrays his friends, and destroys the Grand Design will be crushed like this!" he shouted harshly, and with one movement of his hand, the brick broke into a thousand pieces which

tumbled to the floor. Qian Long looked at the hole in the wall and down at the smashed brick in fright.

"Even though you decline to join the vow, we are all friends," said Chen. "But I trust Your Highness will not vacillate and forget the covenant established today."

"Please rest easy over that," replied Qian Long.

"All right. Let us escort His Highness out," said Chen. Wei raced out of the pagoda and shouted: "Come and meet His Highness!"

Half-suspicious, Commander Li and Bai Zhen ordered the troops to move slowly forward, afraid that this was yet another Red Flower Society trick. Suddenly, they saw Qian Long emerge from the pagoda and prostrated themselves on the ground. Bai Zhen led a horse over and Qian Long mounted.

"I have been drinking and composing poetry with them here," he said to Bai Zhen. "I wanted a few days' peace and quiet and you had to make a mountain out a molehill and rob me of my pleasure."

The heroes returned to the pagoda.

"We are extremely happy to have met you all today," said Bald Vulture. "Especially Lord Zhou, whom we have respected for so long, and Master Lu, whom we have not seen for many years. But now my wife and I have some other minor affairs to deal with, and will take our leave."

Madame Guan pulled Chen over to one side. "Are you married?" she asked.

Chen blushed deep red. "No," he replied.

"Are you engaged?"

"Not engaged either," he said. Madame Guan smiled to herself. Then she suddenly screeched: "If you are ever so ungrateful as to turn your back on the one who gave you that dagger, I will never forgive you." Chen was so shocked by the outburst he was completely lost for a reply.

"You scorpion!" her husband shouted from the other side of the side of the room. "What are you lecturing that young man about? Let's be going!"

Madame Guan turned round, emitted an ear-splitting whistle and four dogs

raced out of the trees. The couple bowed before the heroes and took their leave.

"Let us go back upstairs to talk," Chen said. They followed him back up to the top floor of the pagoda.

"I promised the Emperor that I would go to see my teacher and collect two important items from him," said Chen. "But let us first go to Heaven's Eye Mountain to see how Brother Wen and Brother Yu are doing and then make further arrangements."

They left the pagoda and Master Ma and his son returned to Hangzhou by themselves while the rest of the heroes galloped off westwards.

The trees on the hillsides were dense and dark. It was already deep autumn and Heaven's Eye Mountain was covered in fiery-red leaves and yellowing grass. Lookouts sent word of the approach of Chen and his comrades and Zhang Jin and the other heroes came down to greet them.

Luo Bing was not among them, and Chen's heart missed a beat, afraid that something had happened to her.

"Where's Fourth Sister?" he asked. "And how are Brother Wen and Brother Yu?"

"They're fine," Zhang Jin replied. "Fourth Sister said she was going to get a present for Fourth Brother. She's been away two days already. You didn't meet her on the road?"

Chen shook his head. "What present?"

Zhang Jin smiled. "I don't know. Fourth Brother's wounds have healed well, but he spends all his time in bed moping. Then Fourth Sister came up with this idea of going to get him a present. I wonder who will lose out as a result?" The others laughed.

They made their way up the mountain and entered the courtyard of a large mansion. Wen Tailai was lying dejectedly on a rattan couch. They told him briefly about what had transpired and then went to the room next door to see 'Scholar' Yu.

As they stepped inside, they heard the sound of sobbing. Chen walked over and pulled aside the bed curtain to reveal Yu lying face-down on the bed, his back shaking uncontrollably. Even girls like Luo Bing and Zhou Qi rarely cried, and they were shocked and embarrassed by his behaviour.

"Fourteenth Brother," Chen said quietly. "We've come to see you. How do you feel? Are your wounds very painful?"

Yu stopped crying, but did not turn over. "Great Helmsman, Brothers, thank you all for coming to see me. Forgive me for not getting up to greet you properly. My health has improved a lot over the past few days, but my face has been burnt so badly, it's so ugly that I cannot face anyone."

Zhou Qi smiled. "What does it matter if a man has burn marks on his face?" she said. "Don't tell me you're afraid you won't be able to find a girl willing to marry you?" Some of the heroes laughed at her lack of restraint.

"Brother Yu," said Lu Feiqing. "Your face was burnt while saving myself and Wen Tailai. When people hear of this act, do you think there is anyone who would not proclaim you to be a hero? What need is there for such distress?"

"You are right, uncle," said Yu, and burst into tears again.

The heroes returned to the main hall. Chen and Xu talked together in low tones, then clapped their hands and the heroes stood up.

"Brothers," said Chen. "So far, things have gone very well for us. But in the future, we will face even tougher problems. I will now give you your assignments. Ninth Brother, Twelfth Brother, you two go to Beijing and see what you can find out about the Emperor's plans and if he intends to break our pact. This will be extremely difficult to execute. You must both exercise great caution." Wei and Shi nodded.

"Now, the Twin Knights," Chen continued. "Please go to the Southwest and make contact with the fighters in Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces. Eighth Brother, you go to Anhui and Jiangsu provinces, Priest Wu Chen to Hubei and Hunan. Thirteenth Brother and Brother Ma in Hangzhou will contact people in Zhejiang, Fujian and Jiangxi, while I would like to ask Master Lu to deal with Shandong and Henan. I would like Lord Zhou, Master Meng, Brother Xu and Mistress Zhou Qi to handle the northwest provinces. Fourth Brother and

Fourteenth Brother will remain here convalescing with Fourth Sister and Tenth Brother to look after them. Xin Yan will accompany me to the Muslim areas.

"I am not asking you to begin preparations for an uprising, but simply to improve relations with members of the fighting community in all areas and to provide a basis on which we can act later," he added. "Absolute secrecy is essential, so do not reveal anything to anyone no matter how close or respected they are."

"We understand," they replied in unison.

"In exactly one year's time we will all gather in Beijing. By that time, Fourth Brother and Fourteenth Brother will be fully recovered and we can begin the great task!"

Cheers arose from the heroes. They followed Chen out of the hall, elated by the prospect of the future.

Only Zhang Jin, assigned by the Great Helmsman to stay at Heaven's Eye Mountain, was unhappy. Wen guessed his thoughts, and went over to speak to Chen.

"Great Helmsman, my wounds are almost healed, and although Fourteenth Brother's burns are serious, he is recovering quickly," he said. "It is a bit much to ask us to stay cooped up here for a year. The four of us would like to accompany you to the Muslim regions. The trip would also help to take Fourteenth Brother's mind off other things."

"All right, we'll do it that way," Chen agreed. Zhang Jin ran joyfully in to tell Yu the news.

Lord Zhou took Chen aside. "Great Helmsman," he said. "The fact that we have discovered through Master Wen that you and the Emperor are blood relations is a matter worthy of great rejoicing. I would like to add to it one more happy event. What do you think?"

"You wish to hold a wedding for Seventh Brother and Mistress Zhou, is that right?"

"Exactly," Zhou replied, smiling.

Chen walked over to Zhou Qi, his face wreathed in smiles, and bowed before her. "Mistress, congratulations," he said.

She blushed deeply. "What do you mean?"

"I should call you Seventh Sister. Seventh Sister, congratulations!" He clapped his hands loudly and the heroes immediately fell silent.

"Just now, Lord Zhou told me he wants Mistress Zhou Qi and Seventh Brother to be married this evening. So we have something else to celebrate!"

The heroes cheered loudly and congratulated Lord Zhou and Xu. Zhou Qi hastily made for her bedroom in embarrassment.

"Tenth Brother!" Wei called to Zhang Jin. "Stop her. Don't let the bride escape!" Zhang made as to grab her and Zhou Qi chopped out with her left hand to fend him off.

"Help!" he cried in mock surprise, dodging to one side. "The bride's attacking me!"

A laugh escaped from her as she charged out of the hall.

Just then, there was the sound of bells outside and Luo Bing ran in carrying a large box.

"Oh good, everyone's here!" she cried. "What's happened to make you all so happy?" She looked enquiringly at Chen.

"Ask Seventh Brother," said Wei.

"What's happened, Brother Xu?" Luo Bing asked, but Xu was speechless for a moment. "Mm? That's strange. Has the Kung Fu Mastermind gone silly?"

'Crocodile' Jiang dodged behind Xu and held up his thumbs and made them bow to each other. "The Mastermind is getting married today," he said with glee.

"Oh, how awful, how awful!" Luo Bing exclaimed, absolutely delighted.

The others laughed. "What do you mean, awful?" asked 'Pagoda' Yang.

"If I'd known, I could have brought a sheep and some nice things back with me. As it is, I have almost nothing to give them as presents. Isn't that awful?"

"Will you let us all see what you've brought for Fourth Brother?" Yang asked.

Luo Bing smiled and opened up the box. Glinting inside were the two jade vases which the Muslims had sent to the Emperor along with their request for a truce.

"Where did you get them?" the heroes asked in astonishment.

"I was chatting with Fourth Brother and mentioned how beautiful the girl on the vases was, but he didn't believe me..."

"I'll bet Fourth Brother said: 'I don't believe she is more beautiful than you.' Am I right?" interrupted Xu.

Luo Bing smiled but did not answer. "Did you go to Hangzhou and steal them from the Emperor?" Xu asked.

Luo Bing nodded, very pleased with herself. "I got them so Fourth Brother could have a look. The Great Helmsman will decide what should be done with them after that, whether we should keep them or return them to Sister Huo Qingtong." Wen examined the vases and tutted in admiration.

"I was right, wasn't I?" asked Luo Bing. Wen smiled and shook his head. Luo Bing started, then realised her husband meant that the girl on the vase could not be more beautiful than she was. Her cheeks flushed.

"The Emperor has many top fighters around him and such precious items as these vases must have been very well guarded," said Priest Wu Chen. "How did you manage to steal them?"

Luo Bing told them how she had slipped into the Yamen, grabbed a eunuch and forced him to tell her where the vases were, slipped poison into the food of some of the guards, and made cat noises to distract the rest, then grabbed the vases. The heroes praised her artistry, all except Lu Feiqing.

"Fourth Sister," he said. "You are very brave, but was it wise to take such a risk alone just for the sake of a remark you made to Master Wen? As it happened, the Imperial bodyguards were fully occupied that particular night searching for the Emperor. If they had been there, things could have turned out differently."

"Yes," Luo Bing replied, then turned and stuck out her tongue at Wen.

The wedding ceremony took place amidst great merriment, and the next morning the heroes made their way down the mountain, wished each other well, and went their separate ways.

Chen and Lord Zhou were both heading for the northwest and Chen suggested they travel together. But Zhou said he wished to take advantage of their presence in the south to visit the Shaolin monastery in Fujian province whose style of kung fu was related to his own. So taking his wife and his assistant Meng with him, he headed south.

Chen, Wen, Luo Bing, Xu, Zhou Qi, Zhang Jin, 'Scholar' Yu and Xin Yan travelled north through Nanking. By the time they had crossed the Yangtse, Wen had completely recovered and Yu was progressing well. As they continued north, the weather became cooler, the grass and trees turned yellow as early winter set in. After passing through Kaifeng, Yu was well enough to ride a horse, and the eight of them galloped together along the highway. The north wind blew angrily, throwing dust and sand into their faces.

Wen, riding the white horse, galloped ahead of the others and stopped at an inn in a small village and told the servants to kill a chicken and prepare a meal. Then he sat down near the door to await the arrival of his friends. He ordered a pot of tea and wiped his face with the hot flannel brought out to him. Suddenly, a figure darted out from a room on the eastern side of the inn but immediately withdrew on catching sight of Wen.

About an hour later, Chen and the others rode up and Wen quietly informed them of what had happened. Xu looked round towards the room and saw a section of the window paper was wet with a black eyeball in the centre which immediately disappeared. He smiled.

"It's a novice," he said. "As soon as he starts, he reveals himself."

"Go over and see him," Chen said to Xin Yan. "If he has financial problems, lend him some money."

Xin Yan went over to the room and said in a loud voice: "All streams under heaven have the same source, Red Flowers and green leaves are all one family."

This was the Red Flower Society members' catch-phrase for identifying themselves to other members of the fighting community. Even if the other party

was not an associate of the Red Flower Society, as long as he knew the phrase and asked for help, he would receive it. But all was quiet in the room. Xin Yan repeated his call, and the door creaked open and a figure dressed in black with a large hat pulled down low came out and gave him a letter.

"Give this to your Master Yu."

Xin Yan took the letter and the figure rsn out of the inn, jumped onto a horse and galloped away. He gave the letter to Yu who opened it and found the following written inside:

"What do ugliness and beauty have to do with true love? I will follow you even over a thousand mountains and ten thousand rivers. And tell your Great Helmsman that the Three Devils of Guandong are on their way to the Muslim regions to get their revenge on Huo Qingtong for killing their martial brother." Recognising the calligraphy as being that of Li Yuanzhi, he frowned and handed the sheet to Chen.

Chen studiously ignored the first sentence, which obviously dealt with private romantic affairs. But he immediately informed the others of the news about the Three Devils of Guandong.

"They are tough fighters," said Wen. "I wonder if she can handle them?"

"We once watched Mistress Huo fighting with that Guangdong Devil, Yan Shizhang, and she proved herself to be a little better than him," Xu replied. "But if the Great Helmsman hadn't stepped in to save her, I'm afraid she would have fallen victim to his evil tricks."

"The eldest of the Devils, Tang Yilei, is very strong, a formidable man," said Wen.

"Since the Three Devils are already on their way, it would be best if someone went on ahead on Sister Luo Bing's horse," Xu suggested. "From the look of things, the military situation in the Muslim regions is tense, and Master Muzhuolun and his people must be busy making defensive preparations. We shouldn't let Mistress Huo be caught unawares by the Three Devils." Chen knew he was right, and he frowned silently.

"Great Helmsman, I think it would be best if you went on ahead," said Xu.

"You speak the Muslim language, your kung fu is good, and the Three Devils have never seen you before. If General Zhao Wei has not withdrawn by the time you get there, you can also help the Muslims."

"All right!" said Chen after a moment's hesitation.

Chen was extremely concerned at the news that the Three Devils of Guandong were out to get Huo Qingtong. The image of her gradually disappearing into the dust of the Great Desert forced its way into his mind once more, but remembering how familiar she had been with Master Lu's pupil, he decided that he was fooling himself about her feelings for him. But he was unable to forget her image.

The white horse was extraordinarily fast, and in less than two days he arrived at Jiayu Fortress, the western end of the Great Wall. He climbed up onto the battlements and looked out at the Wall snaking away into the distance, holding at bay the great wilderness. He felt a sense of excitement at the thought of once more entering the border regions, and followed custom by throwing a stone at the wall. The sandstorms outside the Wall were perilous, the way would be hard, and according to tradition, if a traveller threw a stone at the wall as he passed through the Jiayu Gate, he would be able to return alive.

He travelled by day, rested by night. After he had passed the Jade Gate and Anxi, the desert changed colour gradually from pale to dark yellow, and then slowly turned to grey as he skirted the Gobi. The region was uninhabited, containing nothing but endless expanses of broad desert.

He passed through the Stellar Gorge, the main link between Gansu Province and the Muslim regions. It was already winter and the first accumulations of snow could be seen along the gorge, providing a thrilling contrast of black and white.

"What a perfect place for an ambush," Chen thought.

That night, he lodged in a small hut and the next day found himself at the edge of the Gobi desert. The Gobi was as flat as a mirror, completely different from a sandy desert with its rolling dunes. Gazing into the distance, it seemed to him as if the sky and earth touched one another. All was silent, and it seemed as if he

and his horse were the only beings in the universe.

The As he rode, day after day, he considered the problem of how to find Huo Qingtong. As a Chinese, the Muslims could suspect him of being a spy, so to gain their confidence he would have to resort to deception. He decided to disguise himself as a Muslim, and at the next settlement, bought a small embroidered cap, a pair of leather boots and a striped gown. Riding on, he found a deserted place and changed into his new clothes, burying the old ones in the sand. He looked at his reflection in a nearby stream and was so pleased with his appearance as a young Muslim boy that he let out a laugh.

But he met no Muslims on the road. The Muslim villages and dwellings he came upon were all burnt to the ground, obviously the good work of General Zhao Wei's army. He decided he was unlikely to meet any Muslims on the main highway, so he cut off south, and headed into the mountains. In such desolate wilderness, there was little chance of finding any settlement, and after three days, his dry rations were finished. But luckily, he managed to catch and kill a goat.

Two days further on, he met a number of Kazakh herdsman. They knew that the Muslim army had retreated westwards in the face of the Manchu force, but had no idea where it had gone.

There was nothing for it but to continue west. Chen gave the horse its head and made no attempt to divert it. For four days he covered more than a hundred miles a day with nothing but sand and sky before his eyes.

On the fourth day, the weather turned hot. The burning sun scorched down on both man and horse. He wanted to find somewhere shady where they could rest, but wherever he looked there was nothing but sand dunes. He opened his water flask, drank three mouthfuls, and let the white horse drink the same amount. Despite a terrible thirst, he did not dare to drink more.

They rested for two hours, then started out once more. Suddenly, the white horse raised its head and sniffed at the wind, whinnied loudly, then turned and galloped off south. Chen gave it its head. Soon, sparse grasses began to appear on the sand dunes around them, then green grass. Chen knew there must be an oasis ahead, and his heart leapt. The white horse too was in high spirits and its

hooves flew.

After a while, they heard the sound of running water and a small steam appeared before them. Chen dismounted and scooped up a mouthful of water. As he drank, he felt a coolness penetrate to his lungs and noticed a slight fragrance to the water. The stream was full of little pieces of ice which jostled each other, emitting a crisp jingling noise, like the music of fairies. After drinking a few mouthfuls, the white horse gave a whinny and gambolled about happily for a moment.

Having drunk his fill, Chen felt relaxed and content. He filled his two leather water flasks. In the midst of the sparkling ice fragments, he spotted flower petals floating past, and realized it must be flower beds further upstream which made the waters so fragrant.

"If I follow the stream up," he thought, "I may come across someone who can tell me where Huo Qingtong might be." He remounted and started along the bank.

The stream gradually widened. In the desert, most rivers and streams are larger close to their source as the water is soaked up by the desert sands and eventually disappears. Having lived many years in the Muslim areas, Chen did not consider it strange. The trees along the banks of the stream also increased in number and he spurred his horse into a gallop. As they turned a bend in the stream round a hill, a silver waterfall came into view.

Chen felt invigorated by the discovery of such a gorgeous place in the midst of the barren desert, and was curious to know what vistas would present themselves above the waterfall. He led the horse round and up, and as they emerged from a line of tall fir trees, he stopped in amazement.

Before him was a wide lake fed by another large waterfall at its southern end. The spray from the cascade spread out in all directions, combining with the sunlight to create a glorious rainbow, while a profusion of trees and flowers of many colours surrounded the lake and reflected in its turquoise-green waters. Beyond was a huge expanse of verdant grass stretching off to the horizon on which he could see several hundred white sheep. A high mountain rose into the clouds from the western bank of the lake, the lower slopes covered in green

foliage and the upper slopes in brilliant white snow.

He stood staring at the scene for a moment. The sound of small birds singing in the trees and ice slabs in the lake jostling against each other combined with the roar of the waterfall into a work of music. Looking at the surface of the lake, he suddenly noticed a circle of small ripples, and a jade-white hand emerged from the water followed by a dripping-wet head. It turned and saw him, and with a shriek disappeared back into the water.

In that moment, Chen had been able to see that the head belonged to an extremely beautiful young girl.

"Could there really be such things as water spirits and monsters?" he wondered. He pulled out three chess pieces and lodged them in his palm just in case.

A string of ripples stretched across the surface of the lake northwards, then with a splash, the girl's head re-emerged amidst an outgrowth of flowers and bushes. Through a gap in the leaves, he could see her snow-white skin, her raven hair splayed out over the surface of the water and her eyes, as bright as stars, gazing across at him.

"Who are you?" a clear voice asked. "Why have you come here?"

She spoke in the Muslim language, and although Chen understood, he was unable to answer. He felt dazed, as if drunk or in a dream.

"Go away and let me put my clothes on," the girl said. Chen's face flushed and he quickly went back into the trees.

He was extremely embarrassed and wanted to escape, but he thought he should at least ask the girl for news of Huo Qingtong. For a while he was undecided. Then the sound of singing, soft but clear, floated over from the opposite side of the lake:

"Brother, brother, passing by,
Please come back
Why have you run off so fast
Without a word?"

He walked slowly back to the lake and, looking across, saw a young girl

dressed in a brilliantly white gown sitting bare-foot on a bed of red flowers by the water's edge. She was slowly combing her long hair, still covered in beads of water, as flower petals drifted slowly down onto her head. He marvelled that such a beautiful girl could exist.

The girl smiled radiantly and motioned with her hand for him to come over.

"I was passing this way and felt thirsty," Chen said in the Muslim language. "I chanced upon a stream and followed it here. I did not expect to run into you, miss. It was an unintentional error. Please forgive me." He bowed as he spoke.

"What is your name?" she asked.

"I am called Ahmed."

This was the most common name among Muslim men, and the girl smiled again.

"All right," she said. "Then my name Ayesha." This was the most common name among Muslim women. "Who are you looking for?"

"I have to find Master Muzhuolun."

The girl looked startled. "Do you know him?"

"Yes, I do," said Chen. "I also know his son, Huo Ayi, and his daughter, Huo Qingtong."

"Where did you meet them?"

"They travelled to the central plains to recover the sacred Koran and I happened to come across them there."

"Why are you looking for Master Muzhuolun?"

Chen recognised the note of respect in her voice. "Is he of the same tribe as you, miss?" The girl nodded.

"They killed a number of bodyguard agency escorts while recovering the sacred Koran, and friends of the escorts are now seeking revenge. I want to warn them."

The girl had had a smile constantly playing around her lips, but now it disappeared. "Are the men that are coming to take revenge very terrible?" she

asked. "Are there many of them?"

"No, not many. They are good fighters, but as long as we are prepared, there is nothing to fear."

The girl relaxed and smiled again. "I will take you to see Master Muzhuolun," she said. "We will have to travel for several days." She began to plait her hair. "The great Manchu army came and attacked us for no reason and all the men have gone away to fight. My sisters and I have remained here to watch over the livestock."

As she talked, Chen gazed at her in wonder. He could never have imagined such jade-like beauty, even in his wildest dreams. Such a scene, such a situation was simply not of this world.

The girl finished combing her hair, picked up an ox horn and blew several notes on it. A short while later, a number of Muslim girls on horse-back galloped towards them across the pastures. She went over and talked with them while the other girls weighed Chen up, very curious as to who he was. She then walked over to a tent pitched between the trees and came back leading a chestnut horse carrying food and other essentials.

"Let's go." She mounted in one effortless bound, and rode off ahead of him heading south along the course of the stream.

"How did the Chinese people treat you when you were in the Chinese areas?" she asked as they rode along.

"Some well, some not, but mostly well." Chen replied. He wanted to tell her he was himself Chinese, but her complete lack of suspicion somehow made it difficult for him to do so. She asked about what the Chinese regions were like. Chen chose a few interesting stories to tell her, and she listened enthralled.

As the sky grew dark, they camped for the night underneath a huge rock by a river. The girl lit a fire, roasted some dried mutton she had brought and shared it with Chen. She was silent throughout, and Chen did not dare to speak, as if words would desecrate the sacred purity of the scene.

The girl began telling him about her youth, how she had grown up as a shepherdess on the grasslands, and how she loved flowers more than anything

in the world.

"There are so many, many beautiful flowers on the grasslands. As you look out, you can see flowers stretching to the horizon. I much prefer to eat flowers than mutton."

"Can you eat flowers?" Chen asked in surprise.

"Of course. I've been eating them since I was small. My father and my elder brother tried to stop me at first, but when I went out by myself to look after the sheep, there was nothing they could do. Later, when they saw that it did me no harm, they didn't bother about it any more."

Chen wanted to say that it was no wonder she was as beautiful as a flower, but he restrained himself. Sitting beside her, he became aware that her body exuded a slight fragrance, more intoxicating than that of any flower. Light-headed, he wondered what lotion she used that was so fragrant. Then he remembered the rules of etiquette and discreetly moved to sit a little further away from her. The girl saw that he had noticed the fragrance and laughed.

"Ever since I was young, my body has given off a fragrance," she said. "It's probably because I eat flowers. Do you like it?"

Chen blushed at the question and marvelled at her simplicity and frankness. But gradually, his reticence towards her faded.

The girl talked of shepherding, of picking flowers and looking at stars and of the games that young girls play. Since leaving home, Chen had spent all his time amongst the fighting community and had long ago forgotten about these child-like matters. After a while, the girl stopped talking and looked up at the Milky Way sparkling its way across the heavens.

Chen pointed up. "That constellation is the Weaving Girl star," he said, "and that one on the other side is the Cowherd Star."

She was fascinated by the names. "Tell me the story about them," she said, and Chen told her how the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl fell in love but found themselves separated by a silvery river, the Milky Way, and how a stork built a bridge across to unite them once a year.

The girl looked sombrely up at the stars. "I have never liked storks before, but

seeing as they built a bridge to bring the Cowherd and the Weaving Girl together, I have changed my mind. From now on when I see them, I will give them something to eat."

"They may only be able to meet once a year, but they have done so for hundreds of millions of years. They are much better off than we ordinary people, doomed to die after a few decades," Chen replied. The girl nodded.

The desert had grown very cold with the coming of night and Chen went to look for some dead wood and grass to build up the fire. Then they wrapped themselves in blankets and went to sleep. Despite the distance between them as they slept, it still seemed to Chen that he could smell the girl's fragrance in his dreams.

Early next morning they started out again heading west, and after several days arrived at the banks of the Tarin River. That afternoon, they chanced upon two mounted Muslim warriors. The girl went over and spoke with them and after a moment the Muslims bowed and left.

"The Manchu army has already taken Aksu and Kashgar, and Master Muzhuolun and the others have retreated to Yarkand," she reported to Chen. "That's more than ten days's ride from here."

Chen was very concerned at the news that the Manchu forces had scored a victory.

"They also said that the Manchu troops are so numerous that our army's only option is to retreat and stretch their lines of communication. When their rations are exhausted, they will not have enough strength left to fight."

Chen decided the Muslim force would probably be safe for a while using this strategy. Once Qian Long's order to halt the war arrived, General Zhao Wei would retire with his troops. Huo Qingtong was now far away from central China and had the protection of a large army, so there was no longer any reason to fear the vengeful Devils of Guandong, Tang Yilei and his two friends. With that thought, he relaxed.

They travelled by day and slept by night, talking and laughing as they went. As the days passed, they became closer and closer, and Chen found himself secretly hoping that the journey would never end, that they could continue as they were

forever.

One day, just as the sun was about to disappear beneath the grasslands, they heard a bugle note, and a small deer jumped out of a spinney of trees nearby. The girl clapped her hands and laughed in delight.

"A baby deer!" she cried. The deer had been born only a short time before and was very small and very unsteady on its feet. It gave two plaintive cries and then leapt back into the trees.

The girl watched it go, then suddenly reined in her horse. "There's someone over there," she whispered.

Chen looked over and saw four Manchu soldiers and an officer carving up a large deer while the fawn circled around them making pitiful cries. The dead deer was obviously its mother.

"Goddamn it, we'll eat you too!" cursed one of the soldiers, standing up. He fixed an arrow on his bow and prepared to shoot the fawn which, ignorant of the danger, moved closer and closer to him.

The girl gave a cry of alarm. She jumped off her horse, ran into the trees and placed herself in front of the fawn. "Don't shoot, don't shoot!" she cried. The soldier started in surprise and took a step backwards, dazzled by her beauty. She picked up the fawn and stroked its soft coat. "You poor thing," she crooned. She glanced hatefully at the soldier, then turned and walked out of the trees with the fawn.

The five soldiers whispered amongst themselves for a moment, then ran after her, shouting and brandishing their swords. The girl started running too and quickly reached Chen and the horses. The officer barked out an order and the five fanned out around them.

Chen squeezed the girl's hand. "Don't be afraid," he said. "I'll kill these villains to avenge the death of the fawn's mother." She stood beside him, the fawn cradled in her arms. Chen stretched out his hand and stroked the animal.

"What you doing?" the officer asked haltingly in the Muslim tongue. "Come here!"

The girl looked up at Chen, who smiled at her. She smiled back, confident that

they would not be harmed.

"No weapons!" the officer shouted, and the other soldiers threw their swords to the ground and advanced. Strangely, despite the usual preference of soldiers for young maidens, they seemed cowed by her glowing beauty and made for Chen instead. The girl cried out in alarm, but before the cry was fully out, there was a whooshing sound and the four soldiers flew through the air, landing heavily on the ground some distance away. They grunted and groaned, unable to get up, for they had all been touched on Yuedao points. The officer, seeing the situation was unfavourable, turned and fled.

"Come back!" Chen ordered. He sent his Pearl Strings flying out and wrapped them around the officer's neck, then sharply pulled him back.

The girl clapped her hands and laughed in delight. She looked over at Chen, her eyes full of admiration.

"What are you doing here?" he asked the officer in the Muslim language. The officer clambered to his feet, still dazed. He looked around and saw his four comrades lying motionless on the ground and knew he was in trouble.

"We, General Zhao Wei, soldiers, orders, here, we here," he replied.

Well said, thought Chen. "Where are the five of you going? You'd better tell me the truth."

"Not cheat," the officer said, shaking with fear. "Orders, go, Stellar Canyon, meet people."

His stuttering Muslim speech was unclear and Chen switched to Chinese. "Who are you going to meet," he asked.

"A deputy commander of the Imperial Guard."

"What is his name? Give me the documents you are carrying."

The officer hesitated then pulled an official document from his pocket. Chen glanced at it and noted with surprise that it was addressed to "Deputy Commander Zhang Zhaozhong".

Master Ma Zhen took Zhang away to discipline him, he thought. How could he be on his way here?

He ripped the letter open and read: "I am delighted to hear you have received Imperial orders to come to the Muslim regions, and have sent this detachment to meet you." It was signed by General Zhao Wei.

If Zhang is coming at the Emperor's command, he must have been entrusted with passing on the order to retreat, Chen thought. I shouldn't interfere. He gave the letter back to the officer, released the paralysis of the four soldiers, then rode off with the girl without saying another word.

"You are very capable," the girl said. "Such a man as yourself would certainly be very well known in our tribe. How is it I have never heard of you before?"

Chen smiled. "The little fawn must be hungry," he said. "Why don't you give it something to eat?"

"Yes, yes!" she cried. She pured some horse's milk from the leather gourd into her palm and let the fawn lap it up. After a few mouthfuls, the fawn bleated mournfully. "She's calling for her mother," the girl said.

Chapter 7

Many hours later, they heard shouting in the distance. The sound of galloping hooves and clashing swords increased in volume until they heard a man near the pit shout: "Daughter! Master Chen! Where are you?"

"Father! Father! We're here!" Princess Fragrance called.

The heroes leapt out of the pit and saw Muzhuolun, sabre in hand, galloping towards them with a ragged bunch of Muslim soldiers behind, fighting bravely. Princess Fragrance ran to him crying "Father! Father!"

Muzhuolun took her in his arms. "Don't be afraid," he said soothingly. "I have come to save you."

Xu jumped onto the back of a horse to get a better view of the situation. He saw a great cloud of dust rising to the east and knew the Manchu armoured cavalry were coming.

"Master Muzhuolun!" he called. "Let's retreat to that high ground to the west!" Muzhuolun immediately ordered his troops to comply. They started out from the pit with the Manchus close behind, and as they reached the hill, saw another force of Manchu troops moving in from the west.

"Huo Qingtong was right," Muzhuolun thought glumly. "I should not have accused her like that. She must be feeling very bad."

They threw up temporary defences on the hilltop and settled down to wait for an opportunity to escape. With the Muslims firmly established on high ground, the Manchus did not dare, for the moment, to attack.

Huo Qingtong stationed her unit about four miles away from the enemy forces. At noon, the unit commanders came to report. She told the commander of the Green Flag's second unit: "Go with five hundred troops and take up positions along the southern bank of the Black River. The Manchu troops are not allowed to cross the river. If they attack, do not engage them head on, but rather delay them as long as possible." The commander bowed and retired.

She then turned to the commander of the White Flag's first unit. "I want you to

lure the Manchu forces westwards. If your troops clash with the enemy, they are not allowed to win the engagement, but must continue to flee into the desert, the further the better. Take our four thousand head of cattle and goats with you and leave them along the road for them to seize."

"Why should we give them our livestock? I won't do it!"

Huo Qingtong's lips tightened. "Do you refuse to follow my orders?" she asked quietly.

The commander brandished his sabre. "If you tell me to win a battle. I will follow your orders. If you tell me to lose a battle, I would rather die than comply!"

"Seize him!" Huo Qingtong commanded. Four guards ran forward and grabbed the commander's arms. "The Manchu forces are oppressing us and to beat them, we must work together with one heart. Will you or will you not follow my orders?"

"No! What are you going to do about it?"

"Execute him!" she commanded, and the officer's face turned pale. The guards pushed him out of the tent and sliced off his head with one sword stroke as the other commanders quivered with fear.

Huo Qingtong promoted the assistant commander to take the dead officer's place and told him to retreat westwards before the Manchu forces until he saw smoke rising from the east, then to return as quickly as possible, avoiding battle with the Manchus. She ordered the other units to gather beside the Great Quagmire to the east.

Her work complete, she mounted her horse and drew her sword. "The first and second units of the Black Flag, follow me," she shouted.

Muzhuolun, Chen and the others were trapped on the hill. The Manchu troops had attacked twice, but had been beaten back. The hill was surrounded by piles of corpses. Losses on both sides had been heavy.

Sometime after noon, there was a movement in the Manchu lines, and a column of mounted Muslim soldiers charged through towards them. Amidst the

flying snow flakes, they spotted Huo Qingtong at its head.

"Charge!" shouted Muzhuolun, and led his men down the hill to meet her. Princess Fragrance galloped over to her sister and embraced her.

Huo Qingtong took her hand and shouted: "Commander of the Black Flag Third Unit: lead your men west until you meet up with the first unit of the White Flag and follow the orders of its commander."

The officer and his troops galloped off, and a column of Manchu cavalry broke from the main force and chased after them.

"Excellent!" exclaimed Huo Qingtong. "Commander of the Black Flag First Unit: retreat with your men towards Yarkand and follow the orders of my brother. Commander of the Second Unit, you retreat towards the Black River." The two units broke out of the encirclement, and disappeared into the distance pursued by two more columns of Manchu cavalry.

"Everyone else head eastwards!" Huo Qingtong ordered, and the remaining Muslim soldiers along with the Red Flower Society fighters galloped through the circle of Manchu troops and away.

The Manchu cavalry, under the command of Zhao Wei closed in on the fleeing Muslims and cut off several hundred of them. All were slaughtered. Zhao Wei was delighted. He pointed to the huge Crescent Moon banner near Huo Qingtong and shouted: "Whoever seizes that banner gets a reward!" The cavalymen surged forward, galloping madly across the desert.

The Muslims were riding good horses and the Manchu cavalry had difficulty keeping up with them. But after ten or fifteen miles, some of the Muslim fighters began to fall behind and were killed by the Manchu troops. Zhao Wei saw they were all either old men or boys, and exclaimed: "Their leader has no crack troops with him. After them!" They galloped on for another two or three miles and saw the Muslim force dispersing, apparently in confusion. Fluttering on the top of a large sand dune ahead was the crescent banner.

Zhao Wei flourished his sword and led the charge towards the dune with his bodyguards behind. But as he reached the top and looked out beyond, he was almost frightened out of his wits. To the north and south, were rank after orderly rank of Muslim warriors, waiting silently. The Manchu force had

originally been several times larger than the Muslim force, but so many units had been sent out in pursuit of the breakaway Muslim columns that only ten thousand armoured cavalry now faced the concentrated might of the Muslim army. Two more Muslim columns appeared behind them, and with enemy troops to the north, south and west, Zhao Wei shouted: "Everyone forward! Eastwards!" The Manchu forces surged forward as the Muslim fighters gradually closed in on them.

Suddenly, there was a chorus of cries from the cavalry unit in the lead. A soldier rode up to Zhao Wei and said: "General! We're finished! There's quicksand ahead!" He could see a thousand cavalymen and their horses already flailing about as they sank into the soft mud.

Chen and the others stood on a sand dune and watched as the Manchu troops fell into the quagmire. The soldiers behind tried to escape, but the Muslims pressed relentlessly in, forcing them into the mud. The air was filled with the screams of the hapless Manchu soldiers, but the mud crept up their legs, and when it reached their mouths, the noise ceased. The dwindling numbers of Manchu troops fought desperately, but in less than an hour, the whole army had been forced into the quagmire. Only Zhao Wei and a hundred or so guards managed to escape after carving a path of blood through the Muslim ranks.

"Everyone head westwards and gather on the south bank of the Black River," Huo Qingtong ordered. The entire force of more than ten thousand troops galloped off.

As they rode, Chen and Muzhuolun discussed what had happened since they parted. Muzhuolun's heart was uneasy. He loved his two daughters more than anything in the world, and they had both fallen in love with the same Chinese man. According to Islamic law, a man could marry four wives, but Chen was not a believer, and he had heard that Chinese had only one wife while the second and subsequent women were not considered real wives. He wondered how the matter could be resolved. "Wait until the Manchus have been beaten," he thought. "One daughter is wise and the other kind. A way will be found."

The great Muslim column arrived at the south bank of the Black River towards evening. A soldier galloped up and breathlessly reported: "The Manchus are attacking hard. The commander of the Green Flag Second Unit is dead, and the

commander of the Black Flag Second Unit is badly wounded. Losses are heavy."

"Tell the deputy commander of the Green Flag second unit to take over. He is not to retreat one step," Huo Qingtong ordered. The soldier galloped off again.

"Let's go and reinforce them!" Muzhuolun suggested.

"No!" she replied and turned to her personal guards. "The whole army will rest here. No one is allowed to light a fire or make a sound. Everyone will eat dry rations." The order was transmitted, and the soldiers settled down silently in the darkness. Far off, they could hear the waters of the Black River and the cries and shouts of Manchu and Muslim fighters.

Another soldier galloped frantically up. "The Green Flag Second Unit's deputy commander has also been killed," he reported. "We can't hold them back much longer!"

Huo Qingtong turned to the commander of the Green Flag Third Unit. "Go and reinforce them," she said. "You will be in command." He raised his sabre in salute and led his unit away. Soon after, the sound of battle rose to a roar.

"The Green Flag units will lie in ambush behind the sand dunes to the east. The White Flag and Mongol units will lie in ambush to the west," Huo Qingtong ordered. "The rest, come with me."

She rode off towards the Black River, and as they approached it, the metallic ring of weapons clashing became deafening. In the torchlight, they saw the Muslim fighters bravely defending the wooden bridge across the river in the face of ferocious assaults by the best Manchu cavalry.

"Give way!" Huo Qingtong shouted, and the fighters on the bridge retreated, leaving a gap through which several thousand Manchu mounted troops swarmed like bees. When about half of the Manchu troops had crossed, she shouted: "Pull away the bridge!"

The Muslims had earlier loosened the beams of the bridge and used long ropes to tie them to horses on the river bank below. The horses strained forward, a series of loud cracks rent the air, and the bridge collapsed, throwing hundreds of Manchu soldiers into the river. The Manchu army was thus cut in two by the river, with neither side able to assist the other.

At the order from Huo Qingtong, the mass of the Muslim army, hiding behind the sand dunes, emerged and overwhelmed the Manchu troops on the near bank. In a short time, they were all dead, and the Manchu force on the other side of the river were so frightened by the sight of the slaughter that they turned and fled towards Yarkand city.

"Across the river and after them!" shouted Huo Qingtong. A make-shift bridge was swiftly constructed with the remains of the former structure and the Muslim army charged off towards Yarkand.

The citizens of Yarkand had long since evacuated their city. Huo Qingtong's brother, on her instructions, had resisted perfunctorily when the Manchus attacked, then led his troops in retreat from the city. Soon after, the Manchu forces fleeing from the banks of the Black River arrived along with General Zhao Wei and his hundred-odd battered bodyguards. The walled city was now full of Manchu soldiers.

Just as Zhao Wei was about to go to bed, he received a report that several hundred troops who had drunk water from wells in the city had died of poisoning. He sent a unit to collect some uncontaminated water from outside. Then the sky turned red. All over the city, fires were lit by a small number of Muslim soldiers left behind, and the city turned into a huge oven.

Under the protection of his bodyguard, Zhao Wei fought his way through the flames and smoke towards the west gate as the rest of the Manchu soldiers trampled each other in their haste to escape. The bodyguards slashed at them with their swords, forcing them to make way for their general. But when they got to the west gate, they found it had been blocked by the Muslims. The fires were burning even more ferociously, and the streets were filled with frenzied mobs of soldiers and horses. Through the confusion, a small group of riders appeared shouting: "Where is the General?"

"Here!" Zhao Wei's bodyguards shouted back.

"There are fewer enemy troops at the east gate," replied one of the riders. "We can force our way out there."

Even in such danger, Zhao Wei remained calm and led his troops in the attack on the east gate. The Muslims fired wave after wave of arrows at them, and

several attempts to break out failed with heavy losses. But at the critical moment, Zhang Zhaozhong led a troop of Manchu soldiers in an attack from outside the city and managed to snatch Zhao Wei away to safety.

Many thousands of Manchu soldiers had already been burned to death, and the stench was sickening. The whole city was filled with cries and screams. Huo Qingtong and the others watched from a piece of high ground.

"It's terrible! Terrible!" cried Muzhuolun. Huo Qingtong sent more troops down to help blockade the east gate of the city. With Zhao Wei gone, the Manchu soldiers left inside were leaderless. They raced frantically about, but with the four gates blocked by the Muslims, they all died in the monster furnace.

"Light the signal fires!" Huo Qingtong ordered, and piles of wolf droppings that had been prepared were put to the torch, sending a huge column of black smoke up to the heavens. (The smoke from burning wolf's dropping is the thickest and blackest of all.) A short while later, a similar column of smoke arose five or so miles to the west.

The Muslims had won three victories and wiped out more than thirty thousand of the best Manchu troops. The warriors embraced each other and sang and danced around the Yarkand city wall.

Huo Qingtong called her officers together. "We will camp out here tonight," she said. "Each man must start ten fires and must spread them out as much as possible."

Part Seven-- 4

More than ten thousand Manchu cavalry chased westwards after the Third Unit of the Muslim's Black Flag Brigade. The Muslims were riding the best horses, but the commander of the Manchu troops was under orders from General Zhao Wei to catch the Muslim force, and he urged his men on mercilessly. The two armies charged across the desert, the roar of horses's hooves sounding like thunder. After a few dozen miles, a herd of several thousand cattle and sheep suddenly appeared in the path of the Manchu army and the soldiers chased after them shouting for joy, and killed as many as they could for food. Their pace slowed. The Muslims, meanwhile, galloped on, never once being forced to clash

with the pursuing Manchu troops. Close to evening, they saw a pall of thick smoke rising from the east.

"Mistress Huo Qingtong has won!" The Muslim commander shouted. "Turn back east!" The warriors' spirits soared and they reined their horses round. Seeing them turning, the Manchu troops were perplexed and charged forward to attack, but the Muslims swung round them at a distance, the Manchus following.

The Muslim units galloped through the night, the Manchus always in sight. The Manchu commander wanted to gain great merit for himself, and many of his cavalry horses died of exhaustion. Towards midnight, they came across General Zhao Wei riding in front of about three thousand wounded. Zhao Wei's hope rose slightly as he saw the Manchu column approach.

"After their success, the enemy will be in a state of unpreparedness," he thought. "So if we attack now, we will be able to turn defeat into victory." He ordered the troops to advance towards the Black River, and after ten miles or so, scouts reported that the Muslim army was camped ahead. Zhao Wei led his commanders onto a rise to view the scene and a chill shook each of them to the bottom of their hearts.

The entire plain was covered in camp fires, stretching seemingly endlessly before them. They heard from far off the shouts of men and the neighing of horses, and they wondered how many warriors the Muslims had mustered. Zhao Wei was silent.

"With such a huge army against us, no wonder...no wonder we have encountered some set-backs," one of the senior military officials, Commander Herda, said.

Zhao Wei turned to the others. "All units are to mount up and retreat south," he ordered. "No-one is to make a sound."

The order was received badly by the troops who had hoped to stop at least long enough for a meal.

"According to the guides, the road south passes the foot of Yingqipan Mountain and is very dangerous after heavy snows," Herda pointed out.

"The enemy's forces are so powerful, we have no choice but to head southeast

and try to meet up with General Fu De," Zhao Wei replied.

The remnants of the great army headed south, and found the road becoming more and more treacherous as they went. To the left was the Black River, to the right, the Yingqipian Mountain. The night sky was cloudy and ink-black, and the only light was a faint glow reflecting off the snow further up the mountain slope.

Zhao Wei issued a further order: "Whoever makes a sound will be immediately executed." Most of the soldiers came from Northeast China and knew that any noise could shake loose the heavy snow above them and cause an avalanche that would kill them all. They all dismounted and led their horses along with extreme care, many walking on tip-toe. Three or four miles further on, the road became very steep, but as luck would have it, the sky was by now growing light. The Manchu troops had been fighting and running for a whole day and a night, and there was a deathly expression on the face of each one.

Suddenly, there was a shout from a scout and several hundred Muslim warriors appeared on the road ahead standing behind a number of primitive cannons. Scared out of their wits, the Manchu troops were thrown into confusion and many turned and fled just as the cannons went off with a roar, spraying iron shards and nails into them, instantly killing more than two hundred.

As the boom of the cannon faded, Zhao Wei heard a faint rustling noise, and felt a coldness on his neck as a small amount of snow fell inside his collar. He looked up the mountain side and saw the snow fields above them slowly beginning to move.

"General!" Herda shouted. "We must escape!"

Zhao Wei reined his horse round and started galloping back the way they had come. His bodyguards slashed and hacked at the soldiers in their path, frantically pushing them off the road into the river below as the rumble of the approaching snow avalanche grew louder and louder. Suddenly, tons of snow intermingled with rocks and mud surged down onto the road with a deafening roar that shook the heavens.

Zhao Wei, with Herda on one side and Zhang Zhaozhong on the other, escaped

the catastrophe. They galloped on for more than a mile before daring to stop. When they did look back, they saw the several thousand troops had been buried by snow drifts more than a hundred feet thick. The road ahead was also covered in deep snow. Surrounded by such danger and having lost an entire army of forty thousand men in one day, Zhao Wei burst into tears.

"General, let us go up the mountain slope," said Zhang. He picked up Zhao Wei and raced off up the slope with Herda following along behind.

Huo Qingtong, watching from a distant crest, shouted: "Someone's trying to escape! Catch them quickly!" Several dozen Muslims ran off to intercept them. When they saw the three were wearing the uniforms of officials, they rubbed their hands in delight, determined to catch them alive. Zhang silently increased his pace. Despite the weight of Zhao Wei, he seemed to fly across the treacherously slippery slope. Herda could not keep up with him and was cut off by the Muslims and captured after a spirited fight. Apart from Zhao Wei and Zhang, only a few dozen of the Manchu troops survived the avalanche.

Huo Qingtong led the Muslim warriors back to their camp, along with the prisoners. By now, the Muslims had taken the main Manchu camp, thereby acquiring huge supplies of food and weapons. The Four Tigers were among those taken prisoner after being found bound and gagged inside a tent. Chen asked them why they had been put there, and the eldest of the four giants replied: "Because we helped you. General Zhao said he would have us killed after the battle." Chen pleaded before Huo Qingtong to allow the four to go free, and she agreed.

Part Seven-- 5

Mournful dirges played as the Muslims dug deep trenches and buried the bodies of the fallen warriors upright and facing west. Puzzled, Chen asked one of the nearby soldiers why the dead were buried in this way.

"Because we believe in Islam," the soldier replied. "If the body is buried upright, then the spirit will ascend to the heavenly kingdom. They face west because that is the direction of sacred Mecca."

When the burials were finished, Muzhuolun led the entire army in prayer to

thank Allah for helping them achieve such a great victory. Then a great cheer went up from the ranks and the commanders of all the units went before Huo Qingtong and presented their sabres to her in respect.

"Inflicting such a crushing defeat on the Manchus also does us a great service," 'Leopard' Wei remarked to Xu, but Xu was deep in thought.

"The Emperor made a pact with us, yet he didn't withdraw his forces," he said. "Could it be that he intentionally sent his troops into the desert to be destroyed?"

"I have no faith in this Emperor," said Wen. "How could he know Mistress Huo Qingtong would win so decisively? What's more, I doubt if he sent Zhang Zhaozhong out here for any good purpose."

As the heroes talked, they noticed Chen gazing at Huo Qingtong in concern. She was seated to one side, her face as white as a sheet, with a wild look in her eyes. Luo Bing went over to talk to her and as Huo Qingtong stood up to greet her, she swayed unsteadily. Luo Bing caught hold of her.

"Sister, what's wrong?" she asked. Huo Qingtong said nothing, but fought to control her breathing. Princess Fragrance, Muzhuolun, Chen and the others ran over. Princess Fragrance led her into a tent and laid her down on a carpet.

Muzhuolun knew his daughter was exhausted after the battle which she had both directed and taken part in alongside the other warriors. She had also had to bear the suspicions of her own commanders. But he was afraid that the thing affecting her most was the relationship between Chen and her sister. Unable to think of anything to say to comfort her, he sighed and left the tent. He went for a walk round the camp, and from all sides heard nothing but praise for Huo Qingtong's brilliant strategy.

That night, he slept badly, worrying about his daughter. Early the next day before the sky was light, he went over to her tent to see how she was, but found her tent was empty. He hurriedly asked the guard outside what had happened to her.

"Mistress Huo Qingtong left about two hours ago," the guard replied.

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know, Lord. She told me to give you this letter." Muzhuolun grabbed

it and tore it open. Inside, in Huo Qingtong's delicate hand, was written:

"Father, the war is now over. All that is necessary is to tighten the encirclement and the remaining Manchu soldiers will be annihilated in a few days, (signed) your daughter."

"Which direction did she go?" he asked. The guard pointed east.

Muzhuolun found a horse and galloped off immediately in pursuit. He rode for an hour into the depths of the flat desert where it was possible to see several miles in all directions, but found no sign of any living being. Afraid that she may have changed direction, he decided the only thing to do was to return to the camp. Half way back, he met Princess Fragrance, Chen and the other heroes who were all anxious about her safety. Once back in camp, Muzhuolun sent units out to the north, south, east and west to search. By evening, three units had returned without finding anything, while the fourth brought back a young Chinese youth dressed in black clothes.

'Scholar' Yu stared at the youth in shock: it was Li Yuanzhi dressed as usual in boy's clothes.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, hurrying up to meet her.

"I came to find you, and happened to run into them," she replied, very happy to see him again.

Princess Fragrance was frantic with worry about her lost sister. "What can have happened to her?" she asked Chen. "What can we do?"

"I will go and find her," he replied. "Come what may, I'll convince her to come back."

"I'll go with you," she said at once.

Chen nodded. "All right. Go and ask your father."

"You all do just as you like anyway," Muzhuolun replied angrily, stamping his foot. Princess Fragrance looked up at her father and saw how bloodshot his eyes were. She took his hand and squeezed it.

Yuanzhi ignored the others, and bombarded Yu with questions about what had happened to him since they had parted.

"That's the boy your sister likes," Chen said to Princess Fragrance, pointing at Yuanzhi. "He will certainly be able to convince her to come back."

"Really? Why has she never told me? She's too horrible!" the Princess replied. She walked over towards Yuanzhi to get a closer look. Muzhuolun, who was equally curious, did the same.

Yuanzhi had met Muzhuolun previously and she bowed before him in greeting. Then she saw Princess Fragrance and was immediately struck speechless by her extraordinary beauty. Princess Fragrance smiled at Chen and said: "Tell this gentleman that we are very pleased to see him, and ask him to come with us to help find my sister."

Only now did Chen greet Yuanzhi. "Why are you here, Brother?" he asked. "How have you been since we last met?"

Yuanzhi blushed and laughed. She glanced at Yu, wanting him to explain.

"Great Helmsman, this is Master Lu's pupil," Yu said.

"I know, we've met several times."

Yu smiled. "She is therefore my martial sister."

"What?" Chen exclaimed in surprise.

"She likes wearing boy's clothes when she travels."

Chen looked closely at Yuanzhi and noticed for the first time how delicate her eyebrows were, and how small her mouth, not at all like a man's. Because of the relationship with Huo Qingtong, Chen had never looked closely at her before, but now he stared in shock.

"I was completely wrong about Mistress Huo Qingtong," he thought. "She told me to go and ask Master Lu about his pupil and I never did. Could she have left the camp because of me? And then there's her sister who loves me deeply."

Luo Bing could see how Yuanzhi felt towards Yu and she hoped that with such a beautiful girl in love with him, he could release himself from the self-torture of his adoration of herself. But he looked as desolate and unhappy as ever.

"Where is Sister Huo Qingtong?" Yuanzhi asked. "I have something important to tell her."

"She's gone. We're looking for her now," Luo Bing replied.

"She went out by herself?"

Luo Bing nodded.

"Where did she go?" Yuanzhi asked urgently.

"She left the camp heading east, but whether or not she changed direction, we don't know."

"Oh, no!" Yuanzhi exclaimed, stamping her foot. They asked her what was wrong. "The Three Guandong Devils are looking for Sister Huo Qingtong to get their revenge on her. You know that already. But I met them on the road. They're behind me. If she is heading east, she might run into them."

"We don't have a moment to lose," said Chen. "I will go and find her."

"Don't underestimate the Three Devils," Xu warned. "It would be better if several of us went. Great Helmsman Chen should go first with Princess Fragrance. Mistress Li, you also know her, but it would be too dangerous for you to go alone. Perhaps Brother Yu could go with you. My wife and I can go and search too, while the others remain here at the camp to watch for Zhang Zhaozhong."

"Fine!" said Chen. He borrowed Luo Bing's white horse and he and Princess Frangrance galloped off with the others not far behind.

At about noon that day, Wen and the other heroes were chatting with Muzhuolun in his tent when a guard rushed in to report that the Manchu general Herda had escaped and the four soldiers guarding him had been killed. They hurried over, and found a dagger stuck in the chest of one of the dead soldiers with a note attached to it which read: "To the heroes of the Red Flower Society from Zhang Zhaozhong".

Wen angrily screwed the piece of paper up into a ball. "Master Muzhuolun," he said. "You maintain the encirclement of the Manchus, and we'll go and find this traitor Zhang Zhaozhong." Muzhuolun nodded, and Wen led the other heroes off into the desert, following the tracks of the Manchu horses.

Chapter 8

Zhang and the Three Devils watched the wolves swarm after Chen and the girls with great relief, although they felt a tinge of regret at the thought of two such beautiful girls being ravished by the animals. The four men sat down to rest for a while, then roasted and ate one of the dead wolves left behind. Gu noticed that the supply of tree branches was almost exhausted, and too lazy to go and get more, he threw piles of wolf's dung onto the fire to stoke up the flames. Before long, a column of thick, black smoke was rising towards the heavens.

Just as they had eaten their fill of wolf meat, they noticed a dust cloud approaching from the east. Assuming it to be another wolf pack, they frantically jumped up and ran for the horses. Only two horses were left, both of which had been brought by the Three Devils. Zhang stretched out his hand to take the reins of one of the mounts, but Hahetai lunged in front of him and grabbed them first, shouting: "What do you think you're doing?"

Zhang was about to attack him when he spied Tang and Gu with weapons in their hands closing in. "Why are you getting so excited?" he protested. "They aren't wolves."

The Three Devils turned to look and Zhang vaulted onto the horse's back. Only then did he notice that his lie was in fact the truth: in the midst of the dust cloud was a large herd of camels and goats. He galloped off towards the herd, shouting: "I'll go and have a look!"

After riding only a short way, he saw a rider coming towards him. The rider, an old man dressed in grey, raced up and stopped his mount instantly with a tug on the reins. Zhang marvelled at his horsemanship.

The rider saw Zhang was wearing the tattered uniform of a Manchu military officer and asked in Chinese: "What happened to the wolves?" Zhang pointed west.

By this time, the herd was upon them and in the midst of the dust and noise and confusion, Zhang noticed a bald-headed, red-faced old man and a white-haired old woman riding herd. He was just about to ask who they were when the Three Devils came over and bowed respectfully before the old man in grey.

"We are honoured to meet you again, sir," Tang said obsequiously. "How are you?"

The old man grunted. "Nothing to complain about," he mumbled. It was the Strange Knight of the Heavenly Pool, Master Yuan.

Zhang knew nothing of the old man, but he noted the respect with which the Three Devils treated him.

Master Yuan examined the four of them for a moment, then said: "We are going to catch the wolves. You will all come with me."

They started in fright and wondered if he was insane. But the Three Devils knew his kung fu was formidable and did not dare to refuse.

Zhang, however, emitted a "humph" of astonishment and said: "I want to live a few more years. Sorry, but I will be unable to accompany you." He turned to leave.

Absolutely furious, Bald Vulture grabbed for Zhang's wrist shouting: "So you refuse to heed Master Yuan's orders! Do you wish to die?"

Zhang deflected his hand deftly with a 'Dividing The Clouds and Moon' stroke, and the two fought closely for a while, neither gaining the upper hand. Then they leapt apart, both surprised that they should come upon such a master of the martial arts in the middle of the desert.

"What is your name, friend?" Zhang shouted.

"What makes you think you're good enough to be my friend? Will you or will you not do what Master Yuan says?"

Zhang knew he was as good a fighter as himself, and yet he still respectfully referred to the other old man as "Master Yuan", indicating Yuan's kung fu was probably even better. Who is this Master Yuan? he wondered. "What is your full name, sir?" he asked Yuan. "If you are my superior, I will naturally respect your orders."

"Ha! So you wish to question me, do you?" Master Yuan exclaimed. "It is I that does the questioning. I ask you: just now, you used a 'Dividing the Clouds and Moon' move. But what would you have done if I had replied with a

'Descending the Mountain to Kill the Tiger' stroke on your left while going for your Spiritual Yuedao point on your right?"

Zhang thought for a second. "I would have kicked out with an 'Arrow Shooting the Hawk' move, and grabbed your wrist."

"Then you are obviously a member of the Wudang School," Yuan replied, to Zhang's evident surprise. "Once when I was in Hubei, I sparred with Master Ma Zhen." Zhang went deathly pale. "Now then, if I used a 'Secret Hand' move to counter your attempt to seize my wrist, and then struck at your face with my left hand, what would you do? Master Ma Zhen was unable to avoid this move. Let's see if you can work it out."

Zhang thought deeply for a while. "If you were fast, I would naturally be unable to avoid the blow," he said finally. "I could aim a 'Yuanyang Kick' at your left ribs to force you to retract your hand to defend yourself."

Yuan laughed. "Not bad. Of all the fighters in the Wudang School, you are probably the best."

"I would then aim to touch your 'Xianji' Yuedao point," Zhang continued.

"Good! A master always attacks if he can. But I would then step into the 'Guimei' position and attack your lower body."

"I would then retreat to the 'Song' position and strike out for your 'Heavenly Spring' Yuedao point."

Gu and Hahetai listened in bewilderment to the strange words. Hahetai gave Tang's gown a tug and whispered: "What's this code they're speaking in?"

"It's not code, they're using the names of the Sixty Four Positions and the Yuedao points on the human body," Tang replied.

"I advance to the 'Ming Ye' position and attack with a Qimen move," Yuan said.

"I retreat to the 'Zhong Fu' position and counter with a Phoenix Eye move," replied Zhang.

"I advance to the 'Jizhai' position and go for your 'Huan Jiao' Yuedao."

The pressure was beginning to show on Zhang's face, and there was a pause before he answered: "I retreat to the 'Zhen' position and then to the Fu position."

"How come he keeps retreating?" whispered Hahetai, but Tang waved him to silence. The verbal sparring continued, Yuan smiling and obviously at ease, Zhang beginning to sweat and sometimes taking a long time to come up with a response. The Three Devils knew that in a real fight, he would have had no time for such thinking, and would have been beaten long ago.

After a few more moves, Zhang said: "I attack with a 'Xiao Shu' move and then strike at your wrist."

"That's not good enough," Yuan replied. "You lose."

"Please explain," said Zhang.

"If you don't believe me, I'll show you. Be careful!" Yuan's right leg kicked up at Zhang's knees.

Zhang jumped away shouting: "If you touch me..." but before he could finish, Yuan's right hand had shot out and touched a Yuedao point on his chest. He felt a surge of pain and immediately began to cough uncontrollably.

Yuan smiled at him. "Well?" he asked.

The others were amazed by this nonchalant display of such profound kung fu skills. Zhang, looking deathly pale, did not dare to continue his intransigence. "I will do as you say, Master Yuan," he replied.

"But your kung fu is first class," Bald Vulture added. "What is your name?"

"My surname is Zhang, my given name Zhaozhong. And may I ask your names?"

"Ah, so it's the Fire Hand Judge," Bald Vulture replied. "Brother Yuan, he's a martial brother of Master Ma Zhen."

Yuan grunted. "His brother is not as good as him. Let's go." He galloped off.

There were several horses mixed in amongst the camels and goats, and Zhang and Hahetai chose a mount each and began helping to herd the animals after Master Yuan.

As they galloped along, Zhang said to Bald Vulture: "Excuse me. These wolves are very numerous. How do you intend to catch them?"

"You just do as Master Yuan says," Bald Vulture replied. "What's so terrifying about a few little wolves?" Madame Guan, riding nearby, smiled to hear her husband bluffing Zhang.

They rode on. Suddenly Yuan wheeled his horse round and shouted: "The wolf droppings are very fresh. The pack passed here not long ago. From the look of it, we'll catch up to them in another ten miles or so. We'll ride another five miles and then all pick fresh horses. When we have caught up to them, I will lead the way. The six of you must divide up, three on each side to make sure the animals don't escape, otherwise the wolf pack will split up." Just as Tang was about to ask a question, Yuan turned and galloped off.

The wolf droppings around them became increasingly moist as they went.

"The pack must be just ahead," said Madame Guan. "With our camels and horses making such a noise, it's surprising they haven't turned back already."

"Yes, it is strange," her husband replied. A couple of miles further on, the topography began to change and they saw a cluster of hills ahead with a tall white mountain in their midst. The Twin Eagles had long lived in the desert, and had heard many stories about this beautiful mountain, sparkling in the bright sunshine.

"The wolves must have gone into the maze!" Yuan shouted. "Everyone whip the animals!" They raised their horses whips and began beating the camels and horses, and a great roar went up as the beasts snorted and neighed in pain and anger. Before long, a large grey wolf appeared, running towards them from the hills.

Yuan whirled his long whip about his head and cracked it sharply in the air. Then with a shout, he whirled his horse round and galloped off south, with the Twin Eagles, Zhang and the Three Devils driving the herd after him. After a couple of miles, the howls of the wolf pack arose from behind. Bald Vulture glanced back and saw the grey tide moving towards them across the desert. He spurred his horse on and caught up with the others. Zhang, Gu and Tang appeared to be having difficulty keeping their terror under control, but Hahetai was shouting and whistling crazily, driving the animals on and intercepting strays. He was a herdsman by birth and he made sure not one was lost.

The wolves were ferocious and persistent, but they lacked stamina. After four or five miles, they had already been left far behind, and another five miles further on, Yuan shouted: "Let's rest for a while!" They all dismounted and ate some rations while Hahetai herded the animals together. When the wolves began to close in, they started off again.

They continued south in this way, stopping occasionally to rest. Later in the day, two Muslim riders appeared, galloping towards them.

"Master Yuan," they shouted. "Did it work?"

"They're coming, they're coming!" he shouted back. "Tell everyone to get ready." The riders turned and galloped off ahead.

A short while later, they spied a huge circular wall rising up out of the desert, at least forty feet in height with only one narrow entrance. Yuan rode through the opening with the herd of animals close behind him. The Twin Eagles and the others drove them through the gate and then veered off to either side just as the first of the wolves arrived. The huge wolf pack charged into the enclosure and threw themselves at the animals. When the last wolf was inside, a horn sounded and several hundred Muslims sprang from trenches on either side of the entrance, each man carrying a bag of sand on his shoulders. They raced for the opening and in a moment, the gap was completely blocked.

As they clapped and cheered, Zhang wondered what had happened to Yuan inside the stockade. He saw several dozen Muslims standing on top of the wall, and jumped off his horse and ran up a flight of steps, arriving at the top just in time to see Yuan being pulled up by a rope. He glanced down into the pit and jumped in fright: down below were the hundreds of camels and horses, and thousands upon thousands of hungry wolves tearing and biting at them. The noise was terrifying, and blood flowed freely about the floor of the pit. The stockade was built with sand bricks, more than a thousand feet in circumference and its walls coated with mud to make sure there were no footholds available. Yuan stood with the Twin Eagles on the top of the wall laughing heartily, obviously very pleased with himself.

"This wolf pack has been terrorizing the Tianshan mountains for hundreds of years, but you have now destroyed it, Master Yuan," said Bald Vulture. "You

have done the people a great service."

"It needed everyone's cooperation. How could I have done it by myself?" he replied. "Just this stockade alone took three thousand men half a year to complete. You have also been a great help today."

"I'm afraid it will take a long time before all these wolves finally die of hunger," said Madame Guan.

"Of course, especially after they've feasted on all those animals down there."

A cheer arose from the crowd of Muslims below and several of their leaders came up to express their thanks to Yuan and the others. The Muslims brought goat meat and horse milk wine for them to eat and drink.

"Mistress Huo Qingtong defeated the Manchus at Black River and we have defeated the wolves here," said one of the leaders. "Now that the wolves have been caught, we can go and look for her..." He stopped as he spotted Zhang, wearing the uniform of a Manchu officer, standing close by.

"Master Yuan, I have something important to discuss with you," Bald Vulture said later. "Please don't be offended."

"Ha! You've learned some manners in your old age," Yuan replied, surprised by his formality.

"Your pupil's moral character is very bad and he needs to be severely disciplined."

Yuan looked startled. "Who? Chen Jialuo?"

"Yes." Bald Vulture told him about how Chen had first won Huo Qingtong's heart, and then shifted his affections to her sister.

"He is very reliable," Yuan said firmly. "He would never do such a thing."

"We saw it with our own eyes," added Madame Guan, and related how they met Chen and Princess Fragrance in the desert. Yuan stared at them for a moment, then his anger exploded.

"I accepted the job of being his foster father," he exclaimed, "raised him from when he was small. And now this happens. How can I face Great Helmsman Yu in the other world? We must go and find him and question him face-to-face." He

leapt off the wall and mounted his horse: "Let's go!" he roared, and galloped off, with the Twin Eagles following behind.

Zhang's spirits rose as he saw his enemies departing. The Emperor had sent him to find Chen and Princess Fragrance, and before he returned to the court, he wanted to make sure they had been eaten by the wolves. If they had, there was nothing more to be said. But if they were still alive, he would have to catch them. Chen's kung fu, he knew, was only marginally inferior to his own, and if Huo Qingtong joined Chen against him he would lose, so he decided to invite the Three Devils along as well. He gave Gu's sleeve a tug and the two walked off a few paces together.

"Brother Gu," he whispered. "Do you miss that beauty?"

Gu thought Zhang was sneering at him. "What's it to you?" he replied angrily.

"I have a score to settle with that fellow Chen, and I want to go and make sure he's dead. If you come with me, the girl is yours, if she's still alive."

Gu hesitated. "They've probably already been eaten by the wolves," he said slowly. "And anyway, I don't know if Brother Tang would be willing to go."

"If they've been eaten, then you're out of luck," Zhang replied. "But you never know. As to your Brother Tang, I'll go and talk to him."

He went over to Tang and said: "I'm going to look for that fellow Chen to settle accounts with him. If you would be willing to help me, his dagger is yours."

What student of the martial arts would not covet such a precious weapon? Even if Chen is already inside a wolf's belly, Tang thought, the dagger will not have been eaten. He agreed immediately. "Brother Hahetai, let's go," he shouted.

Hahetai was standing on the stockade wall animatedly discussing the wolf pack with the Muslims. Hearing Tang's call, he turned and shouted: "Where are we going?"

"To look for Chen and the others. If their bodies haven't been completely devoured, we can bury them properly. We owe them that much!"

Hahetai respected Chen, and he immediately agreed. The four obtained some

rations and water from the Muslims, then mounted up and started northwards, back the way they had come.

At about midnight, Tang protested that he wanted to stop for the night. But Zhang and Gu insisted that they continue. The moon was high in the sky, making the scene look like a silvery painting. Suddenly, a figure darted from the side of the road and into a stone grave nearby.

"Who's that?" Zhang shouted, reining in his horse.

A moment passed, and then the laughing head of a Muslim appeared from a hole between the flagstones. "I am the corpse of this grave," he said. He wore a flowered hat and, to the great surprise of Zhang and the others, spoke in Chinese.

"What are you doing out here if you're a corpse?" Gu shouted.

"I just wanted to go for a stroll."

"Do corpses go for strolls?" Gu replied angrily.

The head nodded. "Yes, yes, you're right. I am wrong. So sorry." It disappeared back into the hole.

Hahetai burst out laughing, but Gu was furious. He dismounted and stuck his hand into the grave, wanting to pull the Muslim out, but he felt about inside without finding anything.

"Don't take any notice of him," said Zhang. "Let's go."

As the four turned their horses round, they spotted a small, skinny donkey by the side of the grave, chomping grass.

"I'm sick to death of dry rations," said Gu gleefully. "Some roast donkey meat wouldn't be bad at all." He jumped off his horse again and was about to take hold of the donkey's reins when he noticed the animal had no tail.

"Someone seems to have cut off the donkey's tail and eaten it already," he observed with a smile.

There was a whoosh of sound and the Muslim appeared on the donkey's back. He laughed and pulled a donkey's tail from his pocket and waved it about. "The donkey's tail got covered in mud today, which didn't look very nice, so I cut it

off," he said.

Zhang looked at the man's full beard and crazy appearance and wondered who he was. He raised his horse whip and rode by the donkey, striking out at the Muslim's shoulder as he passed. The Muslim dodged to one side, and Zhang suddenly found himself holding the donkey's tail, which was indeed covered in mud. He also noticed a coolness on his head, and found his cap had disappeared.

"So you're a Manchu officer," the Muslim said, swinging the cap about on his finger. "You've come to attack us Muslims, I suppose. This cap is very pretty."

Startled and angry, Zhang threw the donkey's tail at the Muslim who caught it easily. Zhang leapt off his horse and faced him. "Who are you?" he shouted. "Come on! I'll fight you."

The Muslim placed Zhang's cap on the donkey's head and clapped his hands in delight. "The dumb donkey wearing an official's hat!" he exclaimed. He twitched his thighs and the donkey trotted off. Zhang began to run after him, but stopped as a projectile flew towards him. He caught the cold, glittering object deftly and with a surge of fury, recognised it as the sapphire off the front of his cap. By now, the donkey was already a long way away, but he picked a stone off the ground and hurled it at the Muslim's back. The Muslim made no effort to avoid it, and Zhang was delighted, certain that this time he had him. There was a loud clang as the stone hit something metallic, and the Muslim cried out in despair.

"Oh no! He's killed my saucepan! It's dead for certain!"

The four men looked at each other dumb-founded as the Muslim and his donkey disappeared into the distance.

"Was that a man or a demon?" Zhang asked finally. The Three Devils silently shook their heads. "Come on, let's go. This place is evil beyond belief."

They galloped off, and early the next morning, they arrived outside the Secret City. The paths were many and confusing, but the trail of wolf droppings was a perfect guide which brought them unerringly to the base of the White Jade Peak. Looking up, they saw the cave-mouth that Chen had excavated.

Chen woke towards midnight, his strength revived. Under the light of a moonbeam shining down from the crack in the roof of the cave, he could see Huo Qingtong and Princess Fragrance leaning against one another on one of the jade seats, fast asleep. In the silence, he heard their breathing and smelt the fragrance, even more beautiful than that of fresh flowers or musk, emanating from the younger sister.

He wondered again what the wolves outside the mountain were doing and whether the three of them would ever be able to escape. And if they did, would his brother the Emperor hold to his word and throw out the Manchus?

"Which one do I really love?" Over the past few days, this thought had been gyrating round his brain continuously. "Well, which one really loves me? If I were to die, Princess Fragrance would not be able to go on living, but Huo Qingtong would. But that doesn't mean Princess Fragrance loves me more."

The moon beam slowly shifted onto Huo Qingtong's face.

"Princess Fragrance and I have declared our love for each other, but although Huo Qingtong has never said a word about it, her feelings towards me are clear too," he thought. "And why did I come so far to give her a message if it was not because I loved her? What is more, restoring the throne to the Chinese people will involve immense trials and tribulations. She is a better strategist even than Brother Xu, and her assistance would be invaluable," He stopped himself, ashamed of his own thoughts.

"Ah, Chen Jialuo," he whispered under his breath. "Are you really so narrow-minded?"

Time passed and the moonbeam moved across onto Princess Fragrance.

"With her, all I would have is happiness, happiness, happiness," he thought.

His eyes opened wide and he stared up at the crack of light in the rock high above them for a long, long time. Slowly, the moonlight faded and a sunbeam began to slant in, filling the room with daylight. With a yawn, Princess Fragrance woke. She looked over at him through half-open eyes and smiled, her face looking like a newly-opened flower.

Suddenly she jerked upright. "Listen!" she whispered.

Footsteps sounded distantly from the tunnel, gradually moving closer. In the silence of the old caverns, each step could be heard clearly, and their skin crawled as they listened. Chen shook Huo Qingtong's arm to wake her and the three ran quickly back down the tunnel.

When they reached the main chamber, Chen picked up three jade swords and gave one each to the two sisters. "Jade wards off evil," he whispered.

By now, the footsteps were just outside the chamber, and the three hid in a corner near the entrance, not daring to move. They saw the flickering light of torches and four men walked in. The two in front, they instantly recognised as Zhang and Gu.

There was a series of clanging sounds as the weapons of the four flew out of their hands to the ground. Chen knew this was an opportunity not to be missed, and as they stood staring at the floor in dumb surprise, he gave a shout and leapt out, and with knocked the torches to the ground, plunging the chamber into complete darkness. Zhang and the Three Devils turned and raced back down the tunnel. They heard a dull thud followed by a sharp curse as one of them bumped into the wall.

The footsteps gradually receded again.

Suddenly, Huo Qingtong gave a scream of panic. "Oh no! Chase them!"

Chen immediately realised what she meant and raced out of the chamber into the tunnel. But before he reached its end, he heard a steady creaking sound followed by a heavy bang, and he knew the stone door was closed.

Huo Qingtong and Princess Fragrance ran up behind him. He felt around for a piece of wood, found one and lit it, then looked again at the scarred surface of the stone door, the relic of the death struggle of the skeletons around them.

"We're finished!" Huo Qingtong said, despairingly.

Princess Fragrance grabbed her hand. "Sister, don't be afraid!"

Chen forced a smile. "It would be strange if we three died here."

For some reason, he felt a sense of relief wash over him as if a great weight had been taken from his shoulders. He picked a skull off the ground and said to

it: "Well brother, you have three new companions." Princess Fragrance gasped, and then laughed out loud.

Huo Qingtong looked at them both. "Let's go back to the Jade Room," she said after a while. "Once we've settled down we can start thinking things through."

They walked back the way they had come. Huo Qingtong pulled out the map once more and pored over it, desperately searching for a way out. Chen knew that if they were to escape it was more likely to be because of outside help or because Zhang returned to look for them. But how could rescuers find them? And Zhang, after the fright he had just received, was unlikely to dare to come in again.

"I want to sing a song," Princess Fragrance announced.

"Please do," replied Chen.

She sang for a while then stopped, concerned about Huo Qingtong who was still staring hard at the map, her head resting on her hands.

"Sister, you should rest for while," Princess Fragrance said. She stood up and went over to the jade bed and said to the skeleton lying on it: "Excuse me, I wonder if you could move over a bit? My sister needs to lie down and rest." She carefully pushed the bones into a pile in the corner of the bed. "Oh!" she said, picking something up. "What's this?"

Chen and Huo Qingtong walked over and saw she was holding a goatskin scroll of great antiquity. The scroll had turned black, but under the sunlight, it was possible to see it was covered in writing, all in an ancient Muslim hand. Huo Qingtong glanced through it, and pointed at the skeleton on the bed.

"It was written by this girl with her own blood just before she died. Her name was Mami," she said.

"Mami?" asked Chen.

"It means 'beautiful'. I'm sure she was very beautiful when she was alive." She put down the book and went back to examining the map.

"Does the map indicate some other exit?" Chen asked.

"There appears to be a secret tunnel somewhere, but I can't work out where."

Chen sighed. "Would you read out this Miss Mami's last words to me?" he asked Princess Fragrance. She nodded, and began to quietly recite:

"Everyone in the city, thousands upon thousands of people are all dead. The guards of the Mountain and the warriors of Islam are all dead. My Ali has gone to meet Allah, and his Mami will be going soon too. I will write our story out here, so that the children of Allah will know that, victorious or defeated, our warriors of Islam fight to the end, and never surrender!"

"So this lady was not only beautiful, but courageous too," commented Chen.

Princess Fragrance continued to read:

"Baojunlonga oppressed us for forty years. In those forty years, he forced thousands of commoners to construct this secret city and carve out the chambers and halls within the Sacred Mountain. He killed them all. After he died, his son Sanglaba proved to be even more cruel. Of every ten goats raised by the Muslim people every year, four had to be given to him; of every five camels, he claimed two. We became poorer and poorer each year. Any beautiful daughters among the Muslim families were taken into the city, and once there, none ever came out alive.

"We are the brave children of Islam. Could we stand such oppression from these pagans? Of course not! Over a period of twenty years, our warriors attacked the city five times. But each time, they lost because they could not find their way through the maze. On two occasions, they made it into the Sacred Mountain but Sanglaba used some devilry to steal their weapons, and they were all killed by his guards."

"That's the magnet," said Chen. Princess Fragrance nodded and continued:

"In the year that I turned eighteen, my mother and father were killed by Sanglaba's men and my elder brother became the chief of our tribe. That spring, I met Ali. He was a hero of the tribe. He had killed three tigers, and wolf packs scattered when they saw him. He could beat ten ordinary men, no, a hundred. His eyes were as soft as those of a deer and his body was as beautiful as a fresh flower, but he had the strength of a desert hurricane..."

"The lady is exaggerating, I think," Chen said with a smile.

"Why do you say that?" Princess Fragrance asked solemnly. "Are there not such people in the world?"

"One day, Ali came to our tent to talk to my brother about another attack on the City. He had obtained a copy of a book about Chinese kung fu and had studied it for a year. He said he now understood the basics of the martial arts, and was convinced that even without weapons, they could kill Sanglaba's man. He took five hundred fighters and taught them what he knew, and they practised for another year. By then, I was already Ali's. I was his from the moment I first saw him. He told me that when he saw me, he knew that we would win this time. But although they had mastered kung fu, they still did not know the way through the maze of the City, much less the secrets of the Sacred Mountain. Ali and my brother talked for ten days and nights, but could find solution.

"Finally, I said: 'Brother, let me go.' They understood my meaning. Ali was a brave warrior but he began to cry. I took a hundred goats and went to graze them outside the city. On the fourth day, Sanglaba's men seized me and took me to him. I cried for three days and three nights before giving in to him. He liked me very much and gave me everything I wanted.

"At first Sanglaba would not let me take so much as one step outside, but he liked me more and more. I thought about our people every day and of singing while tending goats on the grasslands: that is real happiness. What I thought of most was Ali. Sanglaba saw me becoming more thin and haggard each day and asked me what I wanted. I said I wanted to go out and wander round everywhere. He flew into a great rage and slapped me, so for seven days and nights I didn't smile or say a word to him. On the eighth day, he took me out, and after that on every third day. At first, we only travelled about the city, but later we even went to the very entrance of the maze. I memorized clearly every single street and path until I could have found my way through the maze even if I was blind.

"This took almost a year. I knew my brother and Ali would be getting impatient, but I still did not know the secrets of the Sacred Mountain. Soon after, I became pregnant with Sanglaba's bastard child. He was delighted, but I cried every day in loathing. He asked me what I wanted, and I said: 'You have made me pregnant but you don't love me at all.'

"I don't love you?" he replied. 'Do you think there is anything I would not give you? Do you want red coral from the bottom of the sea, or sapphires from the south? They are yours."

"I have heard that you have a jade pool which makes beautiful people who wash in it even more beautiful and ugly people even uglier," I said.

"His face drained of all colour and in a shaky voice, he asked me where I had heard this. I told him a fairy had whispered it to me in a dream, but in fact I had heard about the pool from the servant girls who said that Sanglaba had never let anyone see it.

"You can go and wash there, but whoever sees the pool must have their tongue cut out afterwards to prevent the secret being revealed. It is a rule decided by the ancestors," he said. He begged me not to go, but I insisted. I said: 'You must think I am very ugly and do not wish me to become even uglier.' Finally, he took me there.

"I took a small knife with me, planning to stab him to death by the pool, which was the only place in the palace where there were no guards, but the knife was snatched away by some magic under the floor of the great hall. After I had bathed in the Jade Pool, I don't know if I really became more beautiful or not, but he loved me even more. However, he still cut out my tongue, because he feared that I would reveal the secret. I knew everything, but had no way of telling my brother and Ali.

"Every day and every night, I prayed to Allah, and Allah finally heard the cries of his poor daughter. He gave me wisdom. Sanglaba had a small dagger which he kept on his person at all times. The dagger had two scabbards, and the inner scabbard was exactly like the blade of a knife. I asked him for it, then I drew a map of the city including all the paths and tunnels in it, sealed it inside a ball of wax and placed it inside the inner scabbard. In the third month after the birth of the child, he took me out hunting. When no-one was looking, I threw the dagger into the Tengbo lake. When we returned to the palace, I released many eagles with 'Tengbo Lake' written on pieces of paper tied to their legs."

Huo Qingtong put down the map and concentrated on listening to her sister's translation of the ancient scroll.

"Several of the eagles were shot down by Sanglaba's men, but I knew that at least one or two would be caught by people of our tribe and that my brother and Ali would go to Tengbo Lake and make a thorough search. They would then find the knife and know the way through the city.

"Ah! How could I guess that although they found the dagger, they did not discover its secret, and did not work out that there was a scabbard within the scabbard? My brother, and Ali decided that the dagger must be a call for them to attack. So they attacked. Most of the warriors lost their way in the maze. My brother, stronger than two camels, was lost in this way. Ali and some of the others caught one of Sanglaba's men and forced him to lead them in their attack on the Sacred Mountain. In the Great Hall, Sanglaba's men fell on them with their jade weapons. But Ali and his warriors had learned their lessons well and even empty-handed they held their own and most died along with their opponents. Seeing his guards being slaughtered and Ali pressing in closer all the time, Sanglaba ran into the Jade Room and wanted me to escape with him via the Jade Pool..."

Huo Qingtong jumped to her feet. "Aha!" she exclaimed. "He wanted to escape via the Jade Pool!"

"Suddenly Ali ran in, and I flung myself into his arms. We embraced, and he called me many beautiful things. I had no tongue and could not answer him, but he understood the cry of my heart. Then that despicable Sanglaba, ten thousands times more evil than a thousand devils, struck him with an axe from behind...."

Princess Fragrance screamed and threw the scroll back onto the bed, an expression of horror on his face. Huo Qingtong gently patted her shoulder, then picked up the scroll herself and continued to read it out loud:

"...with an axe from behind and split my Ali's head in two. His blood spurted out all over my body. Sanglaba picked the child up off the bed, placed it in my hands and shouted: 'We must leave quickly!' I raised that bastard baby high about my head and threw it to the ground with all my strength, and he died in Ali's blood. Sanglaba was deeply shocked at the sight of me killing his son. He raised his golden axe, and I bowed my head, offering my neck to him, but he sighed and rushed back out into the Great Hall.

"Ali has gone to Allah's side and I will soon follow him. Our warriors are many, and with all his soldiers dead, Sanglaba will certainly not survive. He will never again be able to oppress us followers of Islam. I myself killed his only son, so we will be free of oppression from his descendants, because he has none. In the future, our people will be able to live peacefully in the desert and on the grasslands, young girls will be able to lie in their lovers' arms and sing. My brother, Ali, myself, we are all dead, but we conquered the tyrants. Even if their fortress had been stronger than it is, we would still have broken through eventually. May Allah, the True God, protect our people."

Huo Qingtong slowly rolled up the ancient scroll. The three of them sat for a long time without saying a word, deeply moved by Mami's courage and virtue. Finally Princess Fragrance, her eyes full of tears, sighed.

"To relieve the oppression of her people, she was willing to leave her loved ones, to have her tongue cut out and even to kill her own child," she said.

Chen started in fright, thinking of his own conduct compared to this lady of old. Faced with the task of recovering China for the Chinese people, he selfishly thought only of his own romantic problems.

Princess Fragrance noticed the sudden change in his expression. She pulled out her handkerchief and went over to wipe the beads of sweat from his brow, but Chen pushed her away impatiently. She stepped back, startled at his aggressiveness, and Chen's heart softened. Taking the handkerchief from her, he made up his mind that while the great endeavour of the Restoration remained unfinished he would pay no further attention to his romantic affairs, and would treat both sisters purely as friends, as his own sisters.

Huo Qingtong, meanwhile, was once more poring over the map and pondering phrases in the ancient scroll.

"It says here that Sanglaba came to this Jade Room and wanted her to escape with him to the Jade Pool," she murmured. "But this room is a dead end ... Afterwards, he returned the way he had come. He must have been extraordinarily strong. The Islam warriors failed to stop him and he forced his way through to the stone door and locked them all inside, condemning them to death. But the map clearly indicates another tunnel to the pool...."

"Then it must be in this room," Chen replied. He lit another torch and began to examine the walls closely for cracks, while Huo Qingtong looked at the jade bed. Chen remembered how Wen Tailai had been captured at Iron Gall Manor and said: "Could the tunnel be under the table?" He placed his hands beneath the round table top and tried to lift it, but it did not budge.

"There's something strange about this table," he said, pleased. Huo Qingtong brought the torch over to give him more light.

"Oh, look!" Princess Fragrance exclaimed. "There's a design carved onto the surface." They looked closer and saw that it was a herd of winged camels. They had not noticed it before because the carving was extremely shallow. But strangely, the heads and bodies of the camels were not joined, and were more than a foot away from each other. On an impulse, Princess Fragrance grasped the table edge and pulled it from left to right in an attempt to line up the heads and bodies, and it did indeed move an inch or so. Chen and Huo Qingtong joined her and slowly moved the rim round until the camels were whole again. Just as the carving was complete, a grinding sound began and a panel beside the bed slid back to reveal a row of steps leading downwards. The three shouted in triumph.

Chen led the way into the hole, torch in hand. The passage twisted and turned for a while and then ran straight for more than a hundred feet. Then, around a corner, they burst out into daylight. Looking around they saw they were in a small basin surrounded by high mountains. In the centre was a circular pool, the water in which was as green as jade. They were immediately enraptured by the beauty of the scene before them.

"The scroll said that if beautiful people washed in the pool they would become even more beautiful," Huo Qingtong said to her sister with a smile. "You should go and wash."

Princess Fragrance blushed. "You are older than I, you go first," she replied.

"Ai-ya! But I will become more ugly," Huo Qingtong protested. "Are you going to wash or not?" Princess Fragrance shook her head.

Huo Qingtong walked to the edge of the pool and put her hands in the water: it was intensely cold. She cupped her hands and scooped up some water and

saw it was very clear: the water appeared green only because of the jade all about. She took a sip and found it extraordinarily cool and tasty. They all drank their fill. The white peak towering above them reflected off the surface of the pool in a picture of loveliness, and Princess Fragrance lazily moved her hand about in the water, unwilling to leave such an enchanting place.

"The thing to do now is to think of a way to avoid those four devils outside," said Huo Qingtong.

"First, let's bring Mami's remains out and bury them beside the pool," Chen suggested.

Princess Fragrance clapped her hands in delight. "It would be best if we buried her and Ali together," she said.

"Yes. I expect the skeleton in the corner is Ali's."

They returned to the Jade Room. As they were collecting Ali's bones, they found amongst them some bamboo slivers used in China in ancient times for writing. Chen picked them up, and saw they were thickly covered with Chinese characters written in red ink on a black background. Glancing through them, he recognized the writings of the Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi. He had thought it might be some special book and was rather disappointed to find it was instead something he had read and memorized as a child.

"What is it?" Princess Fragrance asked.

"It's an old Chinese book, but it's not much use except to archaeologists." He threw the slivers back on the ground, and as they scattered, he noticed one which looked slightly different from the rest. Beside every character, were circles and dots and Muslim writing. Chen picked the sliver up and saw it was a section entitled 'The Butcher Dissects the Cow' from the philosopher Zhuangzi's lecture, 'The Secret of Caring for Life.' He pointed to the Muslim characters written alongside.

"What does this say?" he asked Princess Fragrance.

"'The key to smashing the enemy is here'," she replied.

"What can that mean?" he wondered out loud, greatly surprised.

"Mami's last testament said Ali got hold of a Chinese book and had learned kung fu from it. This could be it," Huo Qingtong suggested.

"Zhuangzi taught that one should be oblivious of emotion in adversity and obedient to one's superiors," said Chen. "It has nothing to do with kung fu." He threw the sliver back down again, then picked up the pile of bones and walked out. They buried the remains of Mami and Ali beside the Jade Pool and bowed respectfully before the graves.

"Let's go now," said Chen. "I wonder if the white horse managed to escape the wolves?"

"What is the section of that book about?" Huo Qingtong asked.

"It's about a butcher who is very good at his job. The movements of his hands and legs, the sound of his knife chopping, are all perfectly coordinated. The sound has the rhythm of music, the movements are like dancing."

"It would be useful to have such skill when facing an enemy," Huo Qingtong commented.

Chen stared at her in surprise. Every word of Zhuangzi was familiar to him, but suddenly he felt as if he had never read it before. The words of 'The Butcher Dissects The Cow' ran through his mind: 'When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years, I no longer saw the whole ox. And now -- now, I go at it by spirit and don't look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants.'

"If it really is like that," he thought, "I could kill that traitor Zhang with my eyes closed with just a slight movement of the knife..." The two sisters stared at him, wondering what he was thinking about.

"Wait a moment," he said, and ran back inside. A long time passed and still he did not re-emerge. Feeling worried, the two sisters went in as well and found him prancing about among the skeletons in the Great Hall, his face wreathed in smiles. He danced around a pair of skeletons for a moment and then stood stock-still staring at another pair. Princess Fragrance glanced to her sister in fright, afraid that he had lost his mind.

Huo Qingtong took her sister's hand. "Don't be afraid, he's all right," she said.

"Let's go and wait for him outside."

The two returned to the Jade Pool. "What's he doing in there?" Princess Fragrance asked.

"I think he's worked out some new kung fu moves after having read those bamboo slivers and he's now practising them by copying the positions of the skeletons. It would be best if we didn't disturb him."

Princess Fragrance nodded. After a while, she sighed. "Now I understand." she said.

"What?"

"All those people in the Great Hall must have been very good fighters. Even after their weapons had been snatched from them, they still fought on with Sanglaba's guards."

"Yes, but they weren't necessarily very good at kung fu," Huo Qingtong replied. "I would guess they just learned a few really formidable moves which allowed them to take their enemies with them."

"Ah, they were so brave ... But what is he learning them for? Does he want to die with his enemies too?"

"No, a martial arts master would not be killed along with his opponent. He is just studying the finer points of the moves."

Princess Fragrance smiled. "Well I won't worry any more, then." She looked out over the surface of the pool. "Sister," she said. "Let's bathe in the water."

"Don't be ridiculous. What if he should come out?"

"I really want to go and bathe," Princess Fragrance replied. She stared out at the cool water once again. "Wouldn't it be nice if the three of us could live here together forever!" she said softly.

Huo Qingtong's heart jumped. She blushed, and quickly turned her head away towards the White Jade Peak.

A long time passed and still Chen did not emerge. Princess Fragrance took off her leather boots and put her feet in the water. Resting her head on her sister's lap, she gazed up at the white clouds in the sky and slowly fell asleep.

Chapter 9

The day they crossed the provincial border into Fujian, the hills were covered in flowers and dancing butterflies. Chen thought of Princess Fragrance and how she would have loved such a scene.

They were met at the Shaolin Monastery by Lord Zhou, who had come south to Fujian with his wife and servants to meet the Monastery's abbot, Heavenly Rainbow. With Zhou's great name in the fighting community, the Shaolin priests were happy to exchange knowledge with him. Heavenly Rainbow insisted that he stay in the temple, and by the time the Red Flower Society heroes arrived, several months had slipped by.

The abbot led his assistants, Great Insanity, Heavenly Mirror, Great Hardship and Great Idiocy into the great hall to meet the visitors. After they had introduced each other, the abbot led them to a quiet antechamber when tea was served. He asked the reason for their visit.

Chen knelt down before the abbot, tears glistening in his eyes. Greatly surprised, Heavenly Rainbow moved quickly to help him up.

"Great Helmsman," he said. "What need is there for such formality? Please say whatever you wish."

"I have an embarrassing request to make that according to the rules of the fighting community should not even be uttered," Chen replied. "But, Venerable Sir, for the sake of millions of souls, I boldly make this appeal to you."

"Please speak freely," the abbot said.

"The former Great Helmsman of the Red Flower Society, Master Yu Wanting was my foster father..." Heavenly Rainbow's expression changed immediately as he heard the name, and he raised his white eyebrows.

Chen told him in detail about his relationship with the Emperor Qian Long and about the plan to restore the Chinese throne and overthrow the Manchus. Then he asked why his foster father had been expelled from the Shaolin school and whether it had anything to do with Qian Long's identity.

"Please, Venerable Sir," he concluded, his voice almost choked with sobs.

"Think of the common people....."

Heavenly Rainbow sat in silence, his long eyebrows trailing over his closed eyes. He was in deep meditation and no-one dared disturb him.

After a while, his eyes sprang open, and he said: "For several hundred years, it has been the practice of the Shaolin school not to reveal to outsiders information on members who offend against the school's regulations. Great Helmsman Chen, you have come a great distance to our monastery to enquire into the behaviour of our expelled pupil, Yu Wanting. According to the monastery's rules, this would ordinarily be out of the question..." the faces of the heroes lit up with delight. "...but as this affair involves the fate of the common people, I will make an exception. Great Helmsman Chen, please send someone to the Upholding the Monastic Regulations Hall to collect the file."

Chen bowed to the abbot in thanks, and another monk led the heroes to guest rooms to rest.

Chen was congratulating himself on his success when he saw Lord Zhou looking worried. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"The abbot asked you to send someone to the Hall to collect the file. But to get there, it is necessary to pass through five other halls, each guarded by a kung fu master and each one stronger than the last. It will be difficult to make it through all five," Zhou replied.

"We could try and force our way through together," Wen suggested.

Zhou shook his head. "No, the problem is that one person has to win through all five halls alone. If anyone helped him, the monks would come to the assistance of the guardians of the halls and it would turn into a brawl. That wouldn't do at all."

"This is an affair involving my family," Chen said quietly. "Perhaps Buddha will be merciful and let me through."

He took off his long gown, picked up a bag of his 'chess piece' projectiles, tucked the ancient dagger into his belt, and let Zhou lead him to the first hall.

As they reached the hall entrance, Zhou stopped. "Master Chen," he whispered. "If you can't make it, please come back and we'll think of some other

way. Whatever you do, don't try and force your way through or you may get hurt." Chen nodded.

"Everything is arranged!" Zhou shouted, and then stepped to one side.

Chen pushed open the door and walked inside. Under the bright candle-light, he saw a monk seated on a mat, and recognised him as one of the abbot's chief assistants, Great Hardship.

The monk stood up and smiled. "So you have come yourself, Great Helmsman Chen. That is excellent. I would like to ask you to instruct me in a few martial arts moves."

Chen saluted him with his fists. "Please," he replied.

Great Hardship bunched his left hand into a fist and swung it round in a great arc while his right palm swept up. Chen recognised it as the 'Drunken Boxing' style kung fu. He had once studied the style, but decided not to reveal the fact by using it now. He clapped his hands together and countered with the 'Hundred Flowers' kung fu style. Great Hardship was taken off guard and only avoided being struck by dropping to the floor. He rolled away and stood up, and the two continued to fight closely, each a master of his own style.

Great Hardship aimed a blow at Chen's legs. Chen leapt up, and as he landed, hooked his right leg round, tripping the monk up neatly. As fast as lightning, Chen bent over and stopped him from falling. Great Hardship's face flushed red with embarrassment and he pointed behind him.

"Please proceed," he said.

Chen saluted once more and walked through into another hall, seated in the middle of which was the senior monk, Great Insanity. As Chen entered, the monk rose and picked up a thick staff lying beside him. He casually tapped the floor with its tip, and the impact shook the very walls of the hall, bringing a shower of dust down from the rafters. The monk lightly flipped the staff from left hand to right, then attacked using the 'Crazy Demon' staff style of kung fu. Chen knew it would be folly to underestimate the power of this opponent, and he drew his dagger. Great Insanity swept the staff across and Chen ducked down to avoid it then countered with a thrust from his dagger. The two fought round and round inside the hall, their weapons apparently greatly mis-matched.

Rather than attack, Chen concentrated instead on trying to tire the monk out. But Great Insanity's Inner Strength Kung Fu was profound, and as time passed, Chen could discern no hesitation in the monk's actions. On the contrary, the staff seemed to whirl and dance with ever-increasing speed, forcing Chen back into a corner of the hall. Seeing Chen could not escape, Great Insanity grasped the staff in both hands and swung it down at his head with all his strength. Chen stood stock-still until the staff was no more than two inches from him, then grabbed its end and carved a deep line across the middle with his dagger, snapping it in two.

Great Insanity was furious, and charged at Chen again. But with the staff only half its former length, he wielded it with much less dexterity. A moment later, Chen snapped another piece off the end, then dodged passed the monk and ran towards the rear of the hall. With a roar of anger, Great Insanity threw what was left of his staff to the floor and sparks flew in all directions.

As he entered the third hall, Chen's eyes were struck by a bright glare, and he saw both sides of the hall were full of burning candles, several hundred of them at least. In the centre, stood the monk Great Idiocy.

"Master Chen," he said, a welcoming smile on his face. "Let us compete using projectiles."

Chen bowed. "As your Reverence wishes," he replied.

"There are nine candles and eighty-one incense sticks on each side of the hall. Whoever can extinguish all the candles and incense sticks on his opponent's side is the winner." The monk pointed to the altar table in the centre of the hall. "You will find darts and projectiles of all kinds over there. When you have used up all the ones you have, you can go and get more."

Chen pulled a pile of chess pieces from his pocket and wished he had spent more time in the past learning the finer points of dart kung fu from the Red Flower Society's dart expert, 'Buddha' Zhao. "After you," he said.

Great Idiocy smiled again. "Guests first," he replied.

Selecting five chess pieces, Chen threw them simultaneously at the foot of the opposite wall and extinguished five incense sticks.

"Excellent kung fu," Great Idiocy praised him. He took a string of prayer beads from around his neck, snapped the chord and let five of the beads fall into his palm. With one movement, he slung them away, snuffing out five incense sticks on Chen's side.

Chen quickly extinguished another five sticks of incense. Great Idiocy replied by knocking out all nine candles on Chen's side, and in the darkness, the burning tips of the incense sticks became much easier targets for the monk.

"Of course, why didn't I think of that?" Chen thought. He chose nine chess pieces and threw them three at a time at the candles on the monk's side of the hall. But the flames were untouched. He had heard a series of clicks coming from the centre of the hall and he realised that Great Idiocy had knocked each of his nine projectiles down with his prayer beads. As Chen gaped in surprise at such skill, the monk extinguished another four incense sticks. Chen waited for the monk to throw another wave of prayer beads, and then aimed chess pieces to intercept them. But with the candles on the opposite side still burning he found it difficult to spot the small beads clearly and only managed to hit two of the five. The other three struck home.

Great Idiocy, already nine candles and two incense sticks ahead, concentrated on protecting his own candles, while extinguishing more of Chen's incense sticks whenever the opportunity arose. In a short while, he had snuffed out another fourteen, while Chen, putting his all into the task, only managed to extinguish two of the candles. Suddenly, he remembered one of 'Buddha' Zhao's tricks and threw three chess pieces at the side wall with great force. They ricocheted off and two of them struck their targets. Great Idiocy, who had thought the throw was a show of childish petulance on Chen's part, let out a cry of surprise.

Chen continued in this way, bouncing chess pieces off the wall. Great Idiocy had no way of protecting the candles, but he was already several dozen incense sticks ahead, and without taking any further notice of his opponent, he redoubled his efforts to knock out the rest. As the last of the monk's candles went out, the hall was plunged into darkness. Chen counted seven incense sticks left on the monks side while his own was still a mass of red dots, perhaps thirty or forty. Just as he was coming to the conclusion that he had lost, he heard Great

Idiocy shout: "Master Chen, I've used up all my projectiles. Let us stop for a moment and get more from the altar table."

Chen felt in his bag and found he only had five or six chess pieces left.

"You go first," the monk added. Chen walked over to the altar table and with a flash of inspiration, stretched out his arm and swept all of the projectiles into his bag. He jumped back to his place and Great Idiocy ran over to find the table top was empty. Chen threw a shower of projectiles at the remaining fiery spots, and in a moment had extinguished them all.

Great Idiocy let out a hearty laugh. "I have to hand it to you, Master Chen," he said. "That was more of a battle of wits than a trial of strength. You win. Please continue."

"I apologise," Chen replied. "I had already lost, and only used such a trick because of the importance of the matter. Please forgive me."

"The masters guarding the next two halls are my martial uncles. Their kung fu is very good. You must be careful."

Chen thanked him and went on to the next hall. This hall was also brightly lit with candles, but it was much smaller than the previous three. Two rattan mats lay on the floor in the centre of the hall, and the senior monk Heavenly Mirror was seated on one of them. As Chen entered, the monk stood up in greeting.

"Please sit down," he said, gesturing to the other other mat. Chen wondered how he wanted to compete, but took his seat in silence.

Heavenly Mirror was an extremely tall man and very formidable to look at. Even seated on the mat, he was not much shorter than an ordinary person. His cheeks were two deep hollows, and there appeared to be no flesh on his body at all.

"You have passed through three halls, which is greatly to your credit," he said. "But you are still junior to me, so I cannot compete with you on equal terms. Let us do it this way: if you can go ten moves with me without losing, I will let you go through."

Chen bowed to him. "Thank you for your kindness, Your Reverence."

Heavenly Mirror grunted. "Now parry this!"

Chen felt a force striking towards his chest and raised his hands to counter it. Their palms met and Chen was forced to make use of his full strength to keep from falling backwards. The shock of the impact caused a dull ache to grow in his left arm.

"Now the second move!" Heavenly Mirror called. Chen did not dare to counter his hand directly again. He leant to one side, then hit out at the monk's elbow. Heavenly Mirror should have responded by withdrawing his arm, but instead he swept it across in attack, and Chen only just managed to parry it. A bell close to the hall began to chime, and as it resounded, Chen had an idea. He switched to the kung fu style he had learned in the White Jade Peak, synchronising his movements to the sound of the bell. Heavenly Mirror gasped in surprise and fought back carefully.

When the bell ceased, Chen withdrew his hands. "I cannot continue," he said.

"All right. We have already exchanged more than forty moves. Your kung fu is very good. Please pass."

Chen stood up, and was about to walk off when he suddenly swayed and stumbled and hurriedly leant against the wall for support. Heavenly Mirror helped him to sit down again.

"Rest here for a moment and catch your breath," he said. "It won't affect matters."

Chen close his eyes and did as the monk said.

"Where did you learn that style of kung fu?" Heavenly Mirror asked. Chen told him.

"I never guessed that the standard of kung fu would be so high in the western border regions. If you had used that style from the start you would not have hurt your arm."

"Seeing as I am hurt, I am sure I will not be able to make it through the last hall," Chen said. "What does Your Reverence suggest I do?"

"If you can't make it through, turn back."

Chen's martial training made it impossible for him to accept defeat so easily. He stood up and bowed to Heavenly Mirror, then strode bravely towards the last hall.

He was surprised to find it was in fact only a tiny room in the centre of which sat the abbot of the Shaolin Monastery, Heavenly Rainbow. Chen wondered how he could possibly overcome the best kung fu fighter in the Shaolin Monastery if his junior, Heavenly Mirror, was already so formidable.

The abbot bowed. "Please be seated," he said. A steady stream of sandalwood-scented smoke rose from a small incense stove on a table between them. On the wall opposite Chen, was a painting of two monks which, although executed with only a few brush-strokes, was full of vitality.

Heavenly Rainbow meditated for a moment, then said: "There was once a man who was very successful at goatherding. He became very rich, but he was by nature very miserly...."

Hearing the abbot begin to tell a story, Chen was greatly puzzled, but he concentrated on what the old man was saying: "An acquaintance of the goatherd knew he was very stupid, and also that he badly wanted to find a wife. So he cheated the goatherd, saying: 'I know a girl who is very beautiful. I can arrange for her to marry you.' The goatherd was delighted and gave him a large amount of money. A year past, and the man said to him: 'Your wife has given birth to your son.' The goatherd hadn't even seen the woman, but hearing he had a son, he was even more pleased and gave the man another large sum of money. Later, the man came to him again and said: 'Your son has died!' The goatherd cried uncontrollably, heart-broken in the extreme."

Chen had a fairly good general education, and knew he was quoting from the Hundred Parables Sutra of the Mahayana school of Buddhism.

"In fact all worldly matters are like this," the abbot continued. "Power and riches are like the wife and child of the goatherd: just fantasies. What is the point of wasting effort to obtain them when losing them will only cause sorrow?"

"There was once a husband and wife who had three cakes," Chen replied. "They ate one cake each, but could not decide who should eat the third. Finally,

they agreed that whoever talked first would lose the chance to eat the cake."

Hearing Chen relate another story from the Hundred Parables Sutra, Heavenly Rainbow nodded.

"The two stared at each other in silence. Soon after, a thief entered and ransacked the house for the couple's valuables, but because of their agreement, the couple continued to stare at each other without saying a word. Seeing them thus, the thief became even more bold and violated the wife in front of the husband. The husband made no complaint at all about what was happening, but in the end, the wife could stand it no longer and cried out. The thief grabbed up the valuables and fled, while the husband clapped his hands and shouted triumphantly: 'You lose! The cake is mine!'"

Heavenly Rainbow could not help but smile, even though he knew the story well.

"He ignored great suffering for the sake of minor personal satisfaction, allowing the thief to steal his possessions and violate his wife in order to satisfy his appetite. According to Buddhist tenets, one should try to help all living things and should not think only of oneself."

Heavenly Rainbow sighed, and quoted from the Buddhist scriptures: "There are no rules to regulate behaviour, there are no rules to which I am subject. Man is at a standstill until acted upon by a force. Those with no desires, will not be troubled by dreams and fantasies."

"Life for most people is full of hardship," Chen replied. "The monk Zhi Daolin once said: 'Emperors are cruel and evil by nature. How can one stand idly by?'"

The abbot could see Chen's determination to carry out his duty and help ease the people's burden, and was full of respect for him.

"Your enthusiasm is commendable, Master Chen," he said. "I will set you one more question, and then you can have your way."

Chen bowed his head in acknowledgement.

"An old woman was once lying under a tree, resting. Suddenly, a huge bear appeared wanting to eat her. She jumped up and ran behind the tree to escape,

and the bear stretched its paws round either side of the tree to grab her. Seizing the opportunity, the old woman pressed its paws down onto the tree trunk. As a result, the bear could not move, but the old woman did not dare to let go either. Some time later, a man passed by and the old woman appealed to him for help, saying they could kill the bear together and share the meat. The man believed her and took her place holding down the bear's paws. The old woman then fled, leaving the man in the same dilemma she had been in."

Chen knew the moral of the story: "Never regret helping others, even if you suffer yourself as a result," he replied.

Heavenly Rainbow lifted the the long-haired duster he was holding. "Please go through," he said.

Chen stood up and bowed before him. "Please forgive me for trespassing on this sacred place," he said.

The abbot nodded. As he walked out of the room, Chen heard the old man sigh.

** 2 **

He passed along a covered pathway and into yet another hall lit by two massive, flickering candles and filled with row after row of wooden cabinets, each one marked with a piece of yellowing paper stuck to the side. He picked up one of the candles and began his search. Before long, he located the right cabinet. He opened its doors and found inside three parcels wrapped in yellow cloth. The parcel on the left was inscribed in vermilion ink with his foster father's name: 'Yu Wanting'. Chen's hands shook slightly and several drops of candlewax splattered on the floor. Then, with a silent prayer, he opened the parcel.

Inside was a thick file of yellowing papers, a man's embroidered waistcoat, and a woman's white undergarment which was badly ripped and speckled with black spots that appeared to be blood stains. Chen opened the file and began reading from the beginning: "I, Yu Wanting, a twenty-first generation pupil of the Shaolin Monastery of Putian, Fujian Province, do hereby respectfully confess in full my misdemeanors.

"I was born into a peasant family and spent my youth in great poverty and

hardship. I knew the girl Xu Chaosheng, who lived next door, from when we were very young. As we grew, we came to love one another...."

Chen's heart began to thump wildly. "Could it be my foster father's misdemeanor had something to do with my mother?" he wondered. He continued reading:

"We secretly agreed to remain faithful to each other for life, and would marry no-one else. After the death of my father, there were several years of drought, and with nothing in the fields to harvest, I went out into the world to find a life for myself. Due to the compassion of my benevolent master, I was taken in by the monastery. The embroidered waistcoat enclosed was given to me by the girl Xu when I left home.

"Before I had been fully initiated into the higher skills of the Shaolin martial arts school, I left temporarily to return to my home village. Because of the girl Xu's kindness, I was unable to abandon worldly emotions and went back to see her, but was shocked to find that her father had married her into the family of the local landlord, surnamed Chen. In a state of extreme anguish, I entered the Chen mansion one night to visit her. Using martial skills I had learned from the Shaolin School, I trespassed on the property of an ordinary citizen for personal reasons. This was my first breach of discipline.

"The girl Xu moved with her husband to Beijing, and three years later, having failed to renounce my love for her, I went to visit her again. As it happened, that very night, she gave birth to a son. I was outside the window and managed to catch a glimpse of the child. Four days later, I returned once more and found the girl Xu looking very pale. She told me that her son had been taken away by the Princess Rong Zhang and replaced by a baby girl. Before we had a chance to talk further, four assassins entered, obviously sent by the Princess to kill the girl Xu. In the heat of the fight, I received a sword wound on my forehead, but killed all four assassins before passing out. The girl Xu bandaged my wound with the enclosed undergarment. Having heard a secret of the Imperial Palace and having been seen to use Shaolin kung fu, I risked bringing great trouble upon the school. This is my second breach of discipline.

"For the next ten years, although I was in Beijing, I did not dare to go and see the girl Xu again, but submerged myself in learning kung fu. Finally the

Emperor Yong Zheng died and Qian Long succeeded him to the throne. I worked out the dates and realised that Qian Long was the son of the girl Xu. Knowing how cold-blooded Yong Zheng was and afraid that he might have left orders to have her killed to silence her, I entered the Chen mansion again. One night, two assassins did indeed come. I killed them both and found Yong Zheng's written order on one of them. I enclose the document."

Chen flipped through the rest of the pile and found at the end a note on which was written: "If, when I die, Chen Shiguan and his wife are still alive, they must be speedily killed." It was unmistakably the calligraphy of the Emperor Yong Zheng. Chen guessed Yong Zheng must have known his parents would not dare to breathe a word while he was alive, but thought they might try to make use of the information after his death. He continued reading.

"Qian Long apparently knew nothing of the matter, for no more assassins were sent. But I could not rest easy, so I dressed as a commoner and obtained employment in the Chen mansion, chopping firewood and carrying water. This I did for five years. Only when I was certain there would be no further repercussions did I leave. I acted with great recklessness, and if I had been discovered, it would have caused great embarrassment to the Shaolin School, and have damaged the school's honour. This is my third breach of discipline."

Now Chen understood why his mother had wanted him to go with Yu, and why Yu had died of a broken heart after the death of his mother. He thought of Yu working for five years as a lowly servant in his own household to protect his mother, truly an expression of deep love and an overwhelming sense of duty. He wondered which one of the dozens of servants around the house when he was young was Yu.

After a while, he wiped his eyes and read on: "I am guilty of three serious breaches of discipline. Full of fear, I hereby present the full facts to my benevolent master and plead for leniency."

Yu's submission ended at that point and was followed by two lines of vermilion characters which said: "Yu Wanting has committed three misdemeanors. If he is truly willing to reform and follow the teachings of the Buddha, why should we not forgive him since the Buddha was willing to forgive the Ten Sins? But if he hankers after worldly passions and refuses to use

his intelligence to break the bonds of emotion, then he should be immediately expelled. It is up to him."

So his foster father was expelled from the Shaolin School because he could not give up my mother, Chen thought.

He looked up and saw the stars on the western horizon were beginning to fade while in the east, day had already arrived. He blew out the candles, wrapped the things up in the yellow cloth and picked up the parcel. He closed the cabinet doors and slowly walked back out to the courtyard where he found a statue of a laughing Buddha gazing down him. He wondered what his foster father must have felt, being confronted with this Buddha as he left the courtyard after being expelled. He walked back through the five halls, all of them deserted.

As he passed through the last doorway, Lord Zhou and the Red Flower Society heroes came forward to greet him. They had waited anxiously for half the night and were delighted to see him returning safely. But as he came closer, they saw his weary look, and his red, swollen eyes. Chen gave them a brief account of what had happened, omitting only the relationship between his foster father and his mother.

"Our business here is finished," he said. The others nodded.

Lord Zhou accompanied Chen back inside to bid farewell to the abbot, then the heroes collected their belonging and started on the way.

Just as they were leaving the monastery, Zhou Qi went pale and almost fainted. Her father quickly helped her back inside to rest, and the monastery's physician announced after examining her that she was in no condition to travel and would have to rest at the monastery to await the birth. Zhou Qi could only smile bitterly and nod in agreement.

The others discussed the situation and decided that Lord Zhou and Xu should stay to look after Zhou Qi, and join them in Beijing after the birth of the child. Zhou rented a number of peasant huts a couple of miles west of the monastery for them to live in, and Chen and the other heroes started off north.

** 3 **

When they arrived in the town of Tai'an in Shandong province, they were met

by the local Red Flower Society Helmsman who informed them that 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi had also just arrived from Beijing. The heroes were delighted and went to see him. Xin Yan ran on ahead and shouted "Twelfth Brother! The traitor's dead!" Shi looked at him blankly. "Zhang Zhaozhong!" Xin Yan shouted.

Shi's face lit up. "Zhang is dead?"

"Yes, he was eaten up by wolves."

Shi bowed before Chen and the others.

"Twelfth Brother," said Chen. "Have your wounds fully recovered?"

"Thank you for your concern, Great Helmsman, completely recovered. You and the others have had a long, hard journey."

"Is there any news from the capital?"

Shi's expression turned grim. "None from the capital. But I have hurried here to report that Master Muzhuolun's entire army has been destroyed."

"What?" Chen's face went white and he stood up.

"When we left the Muslim regions, General Zhao Wei and the remains of his army was completely surrounded," Luo Bing said. "How could the Manchus score another victory?"

Shi sighed. "Reinforcements suddenly arrived from the south. From what the Muslims who managed to flee say, Master Muzhuolun and his son fought to the death. Mistress Huo Qingtong was ill at the time of the attack and was unable to direct the defence. No-one knows what happened to her."

Chen slumped down into his chair.

"Mistress Huo Qingtong has an excellent command of kung fu," Lu Feiqing said. "She would not come to harm at the hands of the Manchu troops."

They all knew he was just trying to ease Chen's anxiety. It was difficult to see how a sick girl could protect herself in the confusion of battle.

"Huo Qingtong has a sister," Luo Bing said. "The Muslims call her Princess Fragrance. Did you hear any news of her?"

"Nothing at all," Shi replied. "But she is a well-known person. If anything had happened to her, there would be bound to be reports circulating in the capital. I heard nothing, so I presume she is all right."

Chen was embarrassed by their elaborate concern for his feelings. "I will go inside and rest for a while," he said, and walked to his room.

"Go and look after him," Luo Bing whispered to Xin Yan. The boy ran after his master.

After a short while, Chen thrust aside the curtain to his room and strode out again. "We must eat quickly, and get to Beijing as quickly as possible," he said.

A new note of determination in his voice surprised the heroes. Wen raised his thumb in agreement and dug into his food with increased gusto.

As they travelled on, Chen forced himself to smile and chat with the others, but his features became more haggard as the days went by. Before too long, they arrived in Beijing. Shi had rented a large residence in Twin Willows Lane. Priest Wu Chen, the Twin Knights, 'Buddha' Zhao and 'Pagoda' Yang were there waiting for them.

"Third Brother," Chen said to 'Buddha' Zhao. "Please go with Xin Yan to see the Emperor's chief bodyguard, Bai Zhen. Take the lute that the Emperor presented to me and the jade vase that Luo Bing stole and give them to him to pass on to the Emperor, to let him know that we are here."

Zhao and Xin Yan left and returned several hours later.

"We went to Bai Zhen's home to look for him and he happened to be at home," Xin Yan reported. "We gave Zhao's name card to one of his servants, and he rushed out to greet us. He dragged us inside and insisted on us drinking several cups of wine before letting us go. Extremely friendly."

Chen nodded.

Early the next morning, Bai Zhen paid them a visit. He chatted with 'Buddha' Zhao for a while about the weather, then asked respectfully if he could see Chen.

"The Emperor has ordered me to take you to the Palace," he whispered to

Chen when he appeared.

"Good," replied Chen. "Please wait here for a moment."

He went back inside to discuss things with the others. They all thought he should take strict precautions.

Several of the heroes accompanied him into the Forbidden City, while Wen and the rest stationed themselves outside the palace walls to await their return.

With Bai Zhen leading the way, Chen and the others walked through the palace gates, passed guards who respectfully bowed to them. They were overawed by the imposing atmosphere of the palace: its thick, sturdy walls, the heavy defences. They had walked for a good while when two eunuchs ran up to Bai Zhen.

"Master Bai," said one. "The Emperor is in the Precious Moon Pavilion, and orders you to take Master Chen there to see him."

Bai nodded, and turned to Chen. "We are now entering the forbidden area of the palace. Please ask everyone to leave their weapons here." Despite their uneasiness at this, the heroes had no alternative and did as he said, placing their swords on a nearby table.

Bai led them through halls and across courtyards and stopped in front of a large, richly-decorated pavilion.

"Announcing Chen Jialuo!" he called out. Chen straightened his cap and gown and followed the old eunuch into the pavilion while Priest Wu Chen and the others were forced to remain outside.

They climbed up the stairs to the fifth floor, and entered a room in which they found Qian Long, seated and smiling. Chen knelt down and kowtowed before him respectfully.

"You've come," said Qian Long. "Excellent. Please be seated." With a wave of his hand he dismissed the eunuchs. Chen remained standing where he was.

"Sit down and let us talk," Qian Long repeated. Only then did Chen thank him and take a seat.

"What do you think of this pavilion?" the Emperor asked.

"Where else would one find such a building but in the Imperial Palace?"

"I told them to build it quickly. From start to finish, it took less than two months. If there had been more time, it would have been even more elegant. But it will do as it is."

"Yes," replied Chen. He wondered how many workers and craftsmen had died of exhaustion during the construction.

Qian Long stood up. "You have just returned from the Muslim areas. Come and look. Does this look like a desert scene?" Chen followed him to a window, and as he looked out, started in surprise.

To the right, was a classic Imperial Chinese garden, filled with purples and reds and twisting paths, a sumptuous scene. But looking left, towards the west, the view was entirely different. For about a third of a mile, the ground was covered in yellows and, arranged into small sand dunes. Looking closely, Chen saw the signs of pavilions having been knocked down, water pools filled in and trees and bushes uprooted. The scene naturally lacked the majesty of the endless desert, but it was a good likeness.

"Does your highness like desert views?" he asked.

Qian Long smiled. "What do you think of it?"

"A lot of work has been put into it," Chen replied. There were a number of Muslim tents staked on the sand with three camels tied up nearby and with a sudden heartache, he thought of Princess Fragrance and her sister. Looking beyond, he saw several hundred workers demolishing several more buildings: the Emperor had obviously decided he wanted a bigger desert.

Chen wondered why on earth Qian Long would have had a piece of dry, desolate desert constructed in the palace grounds. Incongruously placed in the middle of such a lush Chinese garden, it looked simply ludicrous.

Qian long walked away from the window and pointed to the antique lute he had given Chen, now lying on a small table.

"Why don't you play me a tune?" he said.

Chen could see the Emperor did not wish to discuss the important business at

hand, and he could not raise it himself, so he sat down and began to pluck the strings. As he played, something caught his eye, and he looked up to find the jade vases decorated with Princess Fragrance's image smiling at him across the room. With a twang, one of the strings broke.

"What's the matter?" Qian Long asked. He smiled. "Do you find yourself a little afraid, here in the palace?"

Chen stood up and replied respectfully: "Your humble servant has disgraced himself in front of your Celestial Majesty."

Qian Long laughed., greatly pleased by this. Chen lowered his head and noticed Qian Long's left hand was bound with a white cloth as if it was wounded. Qian Long's face flushed red and he hurriedly put the hand behind his back.

"Did you bring the things I wanted?" he asked.

"They are with my friends downstairs," Chen replied.

Qian Long picked up a small hammer and rapped the table with it twice and a young eunuch ran in. "Tell the gentlemen accompanying Master Chen to come up," he ordered, and the eunuch returned a moment later with the six heroes.

Chen stood up and shot them a glance and they had no option but to kneel down and kowtow before Qian Long.

"You stinking emperor!" Priest Wu Chen thought as he did so. "We almost scared you out of your wits that day in the pagoda in Hangzhou, but you're still just as damned arrogant. If it wasn't for the Great Helmsman, I would kill you this instant."

Chen took a small, sealed wooden box from 'Buddha' Zhao and placed it on the table. "They are in here," he said.

"Good. That will be all," Qian Long replied. "When I have looked at them I will send for you." Chen kowtowed again. "And take the lute with you," he added.

Chen picked up the lute and handed it to 'Leopard' Wei. "Since Your Highness has already subdued the Muslim areas, your servant pleads with you to be

merciful and to order that there be no indiscriminate killings there," he said.

Qian Long did not answer, but simply waving them away with his hand. Bai Zhen led them to the palace gate where Wen and the others were waiting.