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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.