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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.

"Mm, 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, 12 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.