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Yuanzhi sat for a long time with her hands on her cheeks, annoyed that Lu would not teach her Yuedao kung fu. After dinner, she went to see her mother, who nagged her for causing trouble on the road, and told her she was not to wear boy's clothing any more.

"Mother, you're always talking about how you have no son," she replied with a smile. "Aren't you happy now that you have one?"

Madame Li gave up and went to bed. Yuanzhi also got ready for sleep, and was just about to take off her clothes when she heard a light tapping on the window sill and someone saying: "Come out, little boy! I want to ask you something."

Yuanzhi picked up her sword and ran out to the courtyard where she spotted a figure standing in the shadows.

"Follow me if you dare!" the figure said and jumped over the courtyard wall. Like a young calf unafraid of a tiger, Yuanzhi followed without a thought for what might be waiting for her on the other side. As her feet touched the ground, she found a sword thrusting towards her.

Yuanzhi raised her own sword and parried the stroke, shouting: "Who is it?" The yellow-robed figure retreated two steps, and said: "I am the Muslim girl Huo Qingtong. What were you doing helping the agency men to mess up our plans? Why don't you mind your own business?"

"I'll do whatever I want to," Yuanzhi replied. "I happen to like meddling in other people's business. Let me give you another lesson in swordsmanship..." Her sword flashed out, and Huo Qingtong raised her own sword to parry it.

Yuanzhi knew that she couldn't beat the girl on equal terms, so she retreated steadily as she fought, heading towards Lu's room.

"Teacher, teacher!" she called out suddenly. "Someone is trying to kill me!"

A sneering laugh exploded from Huo Qingtong. "Ha! You useless object! You're not even worth killing!"

She began to walk away, but Yuanzhi attacked, forcing her to face her once more. Yuanzhi heard someone behind her and knew that her teacher had emerged; seeing Huo Qingtong's sword bearing down on her, she jumped behind Lu's back.

Lu fended off her strokes with his sword and Huo Qingtong soon realised that his sword technique, while the same as Yuanzhi's, was far superior. She became anxious and attacked fiercely, waiting for an opportunity to retreat. But his strokes followed each other without pause, sticking to her closely.

Yuanzhi put her sword in its scabbard and joined the fray using Boundless Occult Hand kung fu. Huo Qingtong couldn't even beat Lu alone, so how could she manage against both of them? Yuanzhi displayed great cunning: a touch on one side, a hook with her leg on the other. She was not aiming to hurt the Muslim girl, but was intentionally having fun at her expense to pay her back for the tuft of her horse's mane ripped out the day before.

Lu, for his part, had been impressed earlier that day by the Muslim girl's swordsmanship and simply wanted to test her. His sword thrust at her and she raised her own blade to ward it off. Meanwhile, Yuanzhi moved in towards her back, shouting: "Watch out for my fist!" and struck out at her left shoulder with a 'Ferocious Rooster Snatching Grain' blow. Huo Qingtong's left hand twisted round and diverted the blow by grasping for Yuanzhi's arm. With both the Muslim girl's arms now occupied, Yuanzhi seized the opportunity, and the flat of her hand struck at Huo Qingtong's chest. If the blow had been in earnest, it would have caused serious injury, but there was no strength behind it. She ran her hand heavily over the girl's chest and then jumped back laughing. Huo Qingtong was consumed with fury, and ignoring Lu's sword, swung round and attacked Yuanzhi using the Tianshan School's 'Mirage' style. Lu could not stand by. He raised his sword and accepted the brunt of the attack, while Yuanzhi stepped back.

"All right," she laughed. "Don't be angry. You marry me and we'll forget about it."

Huo Qingtong had been deeply insulted, but she knew she could not overcome Lu, so with no other way for her to avenge herself, she threw her sword at Yuanzhi with all her strength aiming to take the girl to the grave with her.

Lu started in fright and threw his own sword at Huo Qingtong's. The two swords collided in mid-air with a clang and fell to earth together. He then pushed Huo Qingtong back five or six steps with a light touch on her left shoulder. "Please don't take offence, miss," he said. "There's something I want to say."

"Well?" she replied angrily. "What are you waiting for?"

Lu looked over at Yuanzhi. "Don't you think you ought to apologise to the lady?"

Yuanzhi walked over and bowed low, a wide grin on her face. Huo Qingtong replied with a fist.

"Oh, no! Don't hit me!" Yuanzhi laughed. She dodged away, and pulled off her cap, revealing her head of beautiful hair.

"Now look," she smiled. "Am I a boy or a girl?"

Seeing Yuanzhi's real face under the moonlight, Huo Qingtong was struck dumb. Her anger and shame evaporated, leaving only irritation.

"This is my pupil," said Lu. "She is always disobedient and I am unable to control her. I am sorry for what happened just now. Please don't be offended."

He brought his hands together in salute and bowed. Huo Qingtong turned slightly away, refusing to accept the apology.

"What is your relationship with the Twin Eagles of Tianshan?" he asked her. Huo Qingtong's eyebrows shot up and her lips quivered, but she maintained her silence. "I have always been on good terms with the Twin Eagles, Bald Vulture and his wife Madame Guan," Lu continued, "so we should not be enemies."

"Madame Guan is my teacher," Huo Qingtong said. "I will go and tell her that you bullied me and told your pupil to attack me, and even joined in yourself."

She gave them both a look of intense hatred, then turned to go.

Lu waited until she had gone a few steps, and then said: "And when you go and tell your teacher, who are you going to say bullied you?"

Huo Qingtong stopped and turned. "Well, who are you?" she demanded.

Lu stroked his beard and laughed. "You've both got the tempers of children," he said. "All right, all right. This is my pupil, Li Yuanzhi, and you can tell your teacher and her husband that I am 'Hidden Needle' Lu. Please convey my congratulations to them on having such a good pupil."

"A good pupil you say! I have lost face for both my teacher and her husband by allowing myself to be bullied in such a fashion."

"Miss, don't think that you have lost face by being beaten by me," Lu replied seriously. "There are few in the fighting community who could last for several dozen moves with me as you did. I suspected you knew the Twin

Eagles when I saw you fighting earlier today, but your use of the 'Mirage' sword style just now decided it. Do they still argue all the time?" He laughed.

Huo Qingtong saw that Lu knew all about her teacher, but she was still reluctant to relent.

"If you are my teacher's friend, why did you tell your pupil to interfere, stopping us from taking back our Sacred Book? I don't believe you are a good man."

"Being beaten in a sword duel is not worth worrying about," Lu said. "But failing to recover your Sacred Book is a different matter. If your people are bullied and insulted, you must be prepared to risk even your own life to get satisfaction."

Huo Qingtong knew he was telling the truth, and bowed before him. "Please tell me how the Sacred Book can be recovered," she said. "If you are willing to help, I and the rest of my tribe will be eternally grateful."

"It was stupid of me to interfere," said Yuanzhi. "My teacher has already given me a long lecture. Please don't worry, I will help you get your Sacred Book back. It's in that red knapsack, isn't it?" Huo Qingtong nodded. "Well, let's go," Yuanzhi added.

"We will discuss the situation first," said Lu. The three talked in low tones for a while then, with Lu keeping a look-out, the two girls crossed over the wall into the inn.

They ran crouching over to the room occupied by the lead escorts, and squatted under the window in the shadow of the wall. Inside, they heard Lead Escort Tong crying and groaning for a while and then stop.

"You are talented, Master Zhang," one of the lead escorts said, "being able to cure Brother Tong so quickly."

"If we had known you were coming, we wouldn't have had to apologise to that Red Flower Society bastard," said another.

"I want you all to watch that pair," a powerful voice replied. "Tomorrow, when Wu and the others arrive we'll make our move."

"Once we've got him, I'm going to kick that bastard in the head a few times, very hard," said Tong.

Yuanzhi slowly extended herself and found a tear in the window paper through which to look. She saw five or six people seated around the room. In the middle was an awe-inspiring man whom she decided must be the one they called Master Zhang. His eyes flashed like lightning and his temples were high and protruding, indicating profound Internal Strength.

"Tong, give me the knapsack," Lead Escort Yan said. "Those Muslims won't give up so easily. I'm afraid we will have more trouble on the road."

Tong began to untie the knapsack hesitantly, as if unwilling to hand it over.

"Now don't worry," Yan said. "Once we've got this knapsack to Beijing safe and sound, we'll all reap the benefits."

Yuanzhi thought swiftly. Yan was a powerful fighter, and once he had possession of the knapsack it would be difficult to recover. She whispered a few words into Huo Qingtong's ear, took off her hat and pulled her long hair over her face. Then she picked two bricks up lying nearby and hurled them through the window. As they crashed into the room, the lamp was suddenly doused. The door opened and several men rushed out.

"Who is it?" one yelled.

Huo Qingtong whistled at them, then leapt over the wall, and the lead escorts and Zhang chased after her. As soon as they had gone, Yuanzhi burst into the room.

Tong was lying on the kang when he saw the Thing come through the door, an unghostly ghost, and inhuman human, with its hair dishevelled and wild. The Thing hopped towards him squealing loudly, and his body went limp with fright. It seized the red knapsack from his hands and ran from the room.

The lead escorts chased after Huo Qingtong for a while, but Zhang suddenly stopped in his tracks. "Damn," he said. "This is just a diversion to lure us away. Get back quickly!"

They returned to the inn to find Tong lying on the kang in a state of shock. It was a while before he managed to tell them how the ghost had stolen the knapsack.

"What ghost?" Zhang said angrily. "We've been tricked."

Yuanzhi hid beside the wall, holding the knapsack tightly, and waited until all the lead escorts had re-entered the room before jumping back out of the courtyard. She whistled softly and Lu and Huo Qingtong appeared from the shadow of the trees.

Yuanzhi was feeling particularly smug. "I've got the knapsack," she laughed, "so you can't..."

Before she could finish, Lu shouted: "Watch out behind!"

As she turned, someone slapped her on the shoulder. She quickly tried to grab the hand but failed and her heart jumped in fright as she realised how formidable her assailant was: he had followed her without her being at all aware of it. She quickly looked around and in the moonlight saw a tall, powerful man standing beside her. She stepped backwards in fright, and threw the knapsack at Huo Qingtong.

"Catch!" she yelled, and brought her hands together to face the enemy.

He was extraordinarily fast. As the knapsack left her hand, he leapt after it and caught it in mid-air just as Huo Qingtong attacked him. With his left hand holding the knapsack, the man swung his arms out using the Long-Arm style. There was great power behind the blow, and both girls were forced back several paces. Yuanzhi now recognised him as Master Zhang. The Long-Arm style was one of the basic techniques of the Wudang School's kung fu, and Yuanzhi gasped involuntarily at the sight of Zhang using it. She glanced around, but Lu was nowhere to be seen.

Yuanzhi advanced a step and attacked using the same Long-Arm technique and as their fists clashed, she felt a prickly numbness run through her arm followed by an unbearable ache. She stumbled, then jumped off to the left.

"Tell me, child!" Zhang said. "Is your teacher surnamed Ma or Lu?"

"He's surnamed Ma," she said to deceive him. "How did you know?"

"Well that makes me your martial uncle. Don't you think you ought to kowtow before me?" He laughed.

As soon as Huo Qingtong heard mention of a connection between them, she abandoned Yuanzhi. She could see that the Koran could not be recovered, and ran quickly away.

Yuanzhi chased after her a short way, but suddenly, a cloud bank covered the moon plunging her into pitch darkness. She started in fright as several thunder claps rolled across the sky and turned back to find that Zhang had disappeared too. By the time she leapt back over the wall into the inn, large droplets of rain were falling, and as she entered her room the downpour came.