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The heavy rain lasted all night. Next morning, having washed and combed her hair, Yuanzhi looked out of the window and saw it was still pouring. Her mother's maidservant came in.

"Officer Deng says the rain is too heavy and we can't leave today," she announced.

Icy gusts blew in through a tear in Yuanzhi's window. She felt bored, particularly as the inn was in such a desolate area. She walked over to the room occupied by Master Wen of the Red Flower Society hoping to catch a glimpse of him, but the door was firmly shut and no sound came from within. The Zhen Yuan Agency had not left that morning either, and several of the lead escorts were lounging about in the dining hall, chatting. Master Zhang was not among them. A gust of wind blew from the west and Yuanzhi began to feel rather cold. She was about to return to her room when she heard the sound of bells outside the front gate and a horse galloped in from the rain.

A young scholar dismounted and ran inside. As one servant led his horse off to be fed, another asked the scholar if he would be staying at the inn.

"I'll have to get back on the road again soon," he replied, taking off his raincape. The servant invited him to take a seat and poured him a cup of tea.

The scholar was tall and slender with a handsome face. In the border areas, such elegance was a rare sight, and Yuanzhi could not help but stare at him. The scholar saw her too and smiled; she flushed and quickly looked away.

There was the sound of horses outside the inn and four more men came in. Yuanzhi recognised them as the ones who had attacked the young woman the day before and she quickly retired to Lu's room to ask what they should do.

"Let us go and have a look first," Lu said and the two peeped into the dining hall through a hole in the window.

One of the four, a swordsman, summoned a servant, quietly questioned him for a moment, then said to his companions: "Those Red Flower Society bastards haven't left yet. We'll deal with them when we've eaten."

The scholar's expression changed slightly and he began to observe the four men out of the corner of his eye.

"Shall I help the woman again?" Yuanzhi asked.

"Don't do anything until I tell you," Lu said. He paid no further attention to the four officers, but focussed his gaze on the scholar.

Once he had finished eating, the scholar moved his bench into the corridor leading to the courtyard. He pulled a flute from the bundle on his back and began to play a pleasant, lilting melody. Strange to say, the flute looked as if it was cast from pure gold. The road they were on was unsafe, and a golden flute openly displayed by a lone scholar was bound to attract thieves.

When the four men had finished eating, the swordsman jumped onto the table and announced in a loud voice:

"We are Yamen officers and we have come to arrest fugitives of the Red Flower Society. Peaceful citizens need not be afraid."

He jumped down from and led the others towards the courtyard. The scholar, still blocking the corridor and playing the flute, ignored them. The swordsman approached him. "Don't stand in the way of Yamen officers," he growled.

The scholar leisurely put down his flute. "The fugitives you gentlemen wish to arrest: what law have they broken?" he asked. "Confucius said, 'Do not do unto others what you would not wish on yourself'. Do you really have to arrest them?"

The officer with the staff stepped forward. "You stop your chatter," he shouted. "Get out of the way!"

"Please calm yourself, honourable sir," the scholar replied. "There's no need to get agitated. Let me be host. We'll all have a drink and become friends, what do you say?"

The officer stretched out his hand to push him away, and the scholar swayed to one side. "Ai-ya," he exclaimed. "A gentleman uses words, not force."

He fell forward as if over-balancing and put out the golden flute to steady himself, finding support on a Yuedao spot on the left thigh of the officer, who involuntarily knelt down as his leg went limp.

"Ai-ya!" the scholar exclaimed again. "There's no need for such courtesy." He bowed before the officer.

Those watching could tell the scholar was highly skilled in the martial arts and Yuanzhi, who had originally been anxious on his behalf, was overjoyed to see him using Yuedao kung fu.

"This bastard might be with the Red Flower Society as well!" cried one of the officers fearfully. The officer with the paralysed leg collapsed on the floor and the others pulled him to one side.

"Are you a member of the Red Flower Society?" the swordsman asked, a slight touch of fear in his voice.

The scholar laughed. "I do indeed. My name is Yu Yutong. I play but a small role in the society, ranking only 14th in seniority." He waved the flute at them. "Don't you recognise me?"

"Ah, you're 'Scholar' Yu!"

"You are too kind," said the scholar. "That is indeed who I am. You sir, with the flashing sword, face of cunning and rat-like eyes. You must be the famous officer from Beijing, Wu Guodong. I'd heard you had retired. Why are you doing getting involved in this kind of game?"

Swordsman Wu's blade flicked out, steely yet smooth and Yu countered with his golden flute, fighting the three officers simultaneously, working through a complex series of moves which soon had them completely flustered. After a moment, Yuanzhi turned to Lu in surprise.

"That's the Soft Cloud sword style," she said.

Lu nodded. The Soft Cloud sword technique is a secret style known only to our school, he thought. If this scholar is a member of the Red Flower Society, then he must be a pupil of Elder Brother Ma.

The school to which Lu belonged consisted of three pupils, among whom Lu was placed second. The most senior was Ma Zhen and the youngest Zhang Zhaozhong, the Master Zhang with whom Yuanzhi had tangled the night before. Zhang was highly talented and very diligent, but he had thrown in his lot with the Manchu court, and, rising swiftly in seniority, had already attained the rank of Major in the Imperial Bodyguard. Lu had long ago severed relations with him.

His guess that Yu was a pupil of Elder Brother Ma Zhen was correct. Yu came from a respected family in southern China, and had already passed the first Imperial Civil Service examination when his father became involved in a dispute over a burial plot with a wealthy family. The ensuing law suit forced him into bankruptcy, and he was imprisoned on a trumped-up charge and died in jail. Yu left home in anger and met Ma Zhen, whom he accepted as his teacher, abandoning his studies in favour of the martial arts. He returned and killed the rich landlord and then became an outlaw, and later a member of the Red Flower Society. He was alert and intelligent, and could speak many different dialects. On this occasion, he was travelling on society

business to the city of Luoyang and had been unaware that his fellow society members, Wen Tailai and his wife, were holed up in the inn.

Hearing the fight, the agency men all came in and stood to one side watching. Lead Escort Tong noticed a catapult on the back of one of the officers, and shouted: "If it was me, I'd leave two to take care of the bastard while the third used the slingshot on him."

The officer with the catapult realised Tong was right and jumped onto a table, readied his weapon and sent a shower of stones flying towards Yu.

Yu dodged them one by one while parrying the other two officers. But his opponents gained the upper hand, and after a few more moves, one of the missiles struck Yu's cheek and the pain began to slow his movements.

"You might as well give up," Tong called to Yu. "Pull down your trousers and we'll give you a taste of the cane."

But Yu did not panic. With a sudden flourish, he drove his left hand at a Yuedao point on Swordsman Wu's chest. Wu quickly retreated two steps and Yu thrust the flute into the stomach of the other officer who grunted loudly and buckled in agony. Yu moved to strike him again, but Wu intercepted him.

Fighting back the pain in his stomach, the third officer moved stealthily up behind Yu as he fought Wu and raised his Devil's Head knife to smash it down on Yu's skull. But before he could do so, a throwing knife plunged into his chest, killing him instantly, and the Devil's Head Knife clattered to the floor.

Yu turned and saw a woman standing nearby, supporting herself on the table with her left hand, the slender fingers of her right hand clasping another throwing knife as if it was the stem of a fresh flower. She was indescribably lovely, and as soon as he saw her, Yu's spirits rose.

"Kill the Eagle's Claw with the catapult first!", he shouted. Eagles Claw was their slang for thugs employed by the Imperial Court.

The officer with the catapult turned round frantically, just in time to see the flash of the blade as it flew towards him. In desperation, he held up the catapult to try to stop it, but the knife still cut into the back of his hand.

"Uncle Wu!" he screamed, "It's too dangerous. Let's get out of here!"

He jumped off the table and fled. Wu forced Yu back with two more strokes from his sword, slung the officer with the paralysed leg over his shoulder, and rushed for the door to the hall. Instead of chasing them, Yu raised the flute to his mouth end-on instead of crosswise, and puffed. A

small arrow shot out of the end which buried itself in the shoulder of the paralysed officer, who screamed with pain.

Yu turned to the woman. "Where's Brother Wen?" he asked.

"Come with me," she said. She was wounded in the thigh, and supported herself with a long door bar.

Meanwhile, as the officers rushed out of the inn, they collided head-on with a man coming in, and Wu reeled back several paces. When he saw it was Master Zhang, his initial anger turned to delight.

"Master Zhang," he cried. "I am useless. One of our brothers has been killed by the bastards and this one has been paralysed."

Zhang grunted and lifted the officer up with his left hand, then squeezed his waist and slapped his thigh, freeing the blood flow. "Have they escaped?" he asked.

"They're still in the inn."

Zhang grunted again. "They've got guts," he said, walking into the inn courtyard. "Resisting arrest, killing an official, then brazenly staying on here."

They led Zhang towards Wen's room, but just as they reached the door, Yuanzhi slid out of a room nearby and waved a red knapsack at Zhang.

"Hey, I've stolen it again," she laughed and ran towards the inn's main gate.

Zhang was startled. "These agency men are truly useless," he thought. "As soon as I get it back for them, they lose it again."

He shot after her, determined to teach her a good lesson. It was still raining, and before long, they were both soaking wet. Yuanzhi saw him closing in and ran off along the side of a stream, Zhang following silently. He increased his pace, closing the distance between them, then stretched out his hand and caught hold of her jacket. Greatly frightened, Yuanzhi pulled away with all her strength, and a piece of cloth tore out of the back. Her heart pounding, she hurled the red knapsack into the stream.

"It's yours," she shouted.

Zhang knew how vital General Zhao Wei considered the Koran to be and immediately leapt into the stream while Yuanzhi laughed and ran off. As he fished the knapsack out of the water, he saw it was already soaked. Frantically, he opened it to see if the Koran was wet, and then let fly with a stream of coarse language. There was no Koran in the knapsack, only two

registers from the main desk at the inn. He opened one and read of money collected from rooms for meals, and of servants' wages. He groaned at how he had allowed himself to be cheated and threw the registers and the knapsack back into the stream. If he took them back and someone asked about them, he would certainly lose face.

He returned quickly to the inn and quickly found Lead Escort Yan with the red knapsack still safely fastened to his back.

"Where did Wu and the officers go?" he asked.

"They were here a moment ago," Yan replied.

"What damned use is there in the Emperor employing people like that?" he demanded.

He walked up to Wen's door. "You Red Flower Society fugitives! Come out immediately!" he shouted. No sound came from the room. He kicked at the door and found it slightly ajar.

"They've escaped!" he yelled, and burst into the room only to find it empty. He noticed a lump under the bed covers, and flung them off, revealing two of Wu's officers lying face to face. He prodded his sword lightly at the back of one of them but there was no movement. He turned them over and saw they were both dead. Both their skulls had been smashed in. It was obviously the work of a master of Internal Strength kung fu, and his respect for Wen Tailai increased appreciably. But where was Wu? And in which direction had Wen and his wife escaped? He called for one of the servants and interrogated him without obtaining even half a clue.

But Zhang had guessed wrong: the officers were not killed by Wen Tailai.