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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. With no time to consider the matter carefully, he quickly threw one of the iron balls in his hand at the knife. It hit the knife with a "Clang" and both knife and ball fell to the ground.

"Ah-ha!" Luo Bing shouted. "So you're all in this together. You old thief! You've already betrayed my husband, why don't you kill me as well?" She raced into the hall, her swords held high, and struck out at Zhou.

With no weapon in his hand, Zhou hurriedly picked up a chair to deflect the blow. "Not so fast!" he protested. "Explain yourself first."

But Luo Bing was in no mood to listen. Zhou retreated steadily as she attacked, heading for the wall. Suddenly, Luo Bing heard the sound of a blade swishing towards her back, and ducked as the blade cleaved over her head. She turned to find Zhou Qi standing behind her, seething with anger.

"You ungrateful woman!" Zhou Qi shouted, pointing her finger accusingly. "I saved you out of the goodness of my heart. What are you doing attacking my father?"

"You of Iron Gall Manor with your fake charity and fake generosity!" Luo Bing replied bitterly. "But you keep away and I won't harm you."

She turned and resumed her attack on Zhou, who dodged left and right, shouting "Stop! Stop!" Absolutely furious, Zhou Qi jumped in front of her father and began fiercely fighting with Luo Bing.

In terms of martial skills and experience, Luo Bing was far superior to Zhou Qi, but because of the wounds on her shoulder and thigh coupled with her resentment and anger, the greatest taboos of the martial arts fighter, she gradually lost the initiative.

"Stop!" Zhou shouted repeatedly, but both girls ignored him. Pan and Tong stood to one side watching the battle.

Suddenly, they all heard a weird cry and saw a black figure lunged at Zhou's daughter. It was a short hunchback wielding a short-handled Wolf's Tooth club, the sharp teeth on the end of which sparkled and flashed as it swung steeply towards Zhou Qi. The girl jumped in fright and countered by chopping at his shoulder. The hunchback blocked her sword rigidly. Under the intense shock of the impact, Zhou Qi's arm went numb and her sword nearly fell out of her hand. She leapt back. The hunchback didn't press his attack, but instead turned to Luo Bing.

"Tenth Brother!" she cried. Tears coursed down her face.

"Where's Brother Wen?" the hunchback, Zhang Jin, asked.

Luo Bing pointed at Zhou, Pan and Tong. "They betrayed him! Tenth Brother, avenge him for me!"

Without waiting for details, Zhang Jin threw himself onto the ground and rolled towards Zhou. Zhou leapt up onto a table and shouted "Stop!" again,

but Zhang Jin was not interested in explanations, and aimed the wolf's tooth club at his thigh. Zhou jumped into the air, landing on the ground just as the club slammed into the sandalwood table. The fangs sank deep into the wood, and for a moment the hunchback was unable to pull the club free.

Just then, Meng rushed into the hall and handed Zhou his gold-backed sword. He had no idea of the hunchback's motives, but anyone attacking his master was an enemy. Zhou and Meng attacked the hunchback together, but Zhang Jin held them off with his club and shouted: "Seventh Brother, if you don't get in here quickly and protect Sister Luo Bing, I will curse your ancestors!"

Zhang Jin and 'Kung Fu Mastermind' Xu had raced day and night without stopping towards Iron Gall Manor. Hearing Zhang Jin's call, Xu ran into the hall and made straight for Luo Bing. Her heart leapt for joy as she spotted him, and she pointed at Tong and Pan.

"They betrayed Brother Wen," she called.

Xu leapt at Tong. Xu was like a dwarf in stature, but his kung fu was superb, and in a second, he had his opponent on the retreat. Tong dodged to the left as Xu stabbed towards him with his knife, then hit the floor with a thud as Xu kicked him off his feet.

Xu felt a current of air hit his back as Bodyguard Pan attacked him holding a pair of tempered iron hoops, and with no time to turn round, he stepped on Tong's chest with his left foot and flipped over to face his attacker. Tong yelled out in pain.

On the other side of the hall, Zhang Jin was battling furiously with Meng, Zhou and Zhou Qi simultaneously.

"Go quickly and guard the manor gate," Meng shouted to an attendant. "Don't let anyone else in."

"Everyone stop!" Zhou called out. "Listen to what I have to say!"

Meng and Zhou Qi immediately stepped back several paces. Xu also retreated a step, and shouted to the hunchback: "Hold it, Tenth Brother. Let's listen to him."

But as he did so, Bodyguard Pan drove his hoops at Xu's back. Caught off his guard, Xu flinched away, but his shoulder was struck. He stumbled, and angrily called out: "Right! You Iron Gall Manor people are full of tricks." He did not know that Pan was not of the Manor. He raised his knife and fought furiously with Pan.

Tong stood at a distance, staring at Luo Bing. She had only one throwing knife left and was unwilling to use it rashly, so she raised her sword and chased after him. Tong nimbly raced about the great hall, dodging around the tables and chairs.

"Don't be violent," he told her. "Your husband is already dead. Why not be a good girl and marry your Uncle Tong?"

On hearing him say that Wen was dead, everything went black before her eyes, and she fainted away. Tong raced over to her as she collapsed.

Zhou's anger surged up as he saw what was happening, and he also ran towards Luo Bing, his gold-backed sword held high. He planned to stop Tong from molesting Luo Bing, but with misunderstanding piled on misunderstanding, he heard someone at the door to the hall shout loudly:

"If you dare to hurt her, I will fight you to the death!"

The newcomer charged at Zhou with a pair of hooks in his hands, aimed at Zhou's throat and groin respectively. Zhou noticed the man's handsome features and strong, vigorous movements. He raised his sword and lightly deflected the hooks, then retreated a step.

"Who are you, honourable sir?" he asked.

The man ignored him, and bent down to look at Luo Bing. Her face was white and her breathing very shallow and he helped her up and put her in a chair.

The fighting in the hall was getting more furious all the time. Suddenly, there was a shout outside followed by the sound of weapons clashing. A moment later, an attendant raced into the hall closely followed by a tall, fat man holding a steel whip.

"Eighth Brother, Ninth Brother!" Xu shouted. "We must kill all of these Iron Gall Manor today, or our work isn't over."

The fat man was 'Iron Pagoda' Yang, ranking eighth in the Red Flower Society's hierarchy, while the one with the handsome face and the hooks was 'Nine Life Leopard' Wei who ranked ninth. Wei was a fearless fighter but had never been wounded and was consequently said to have nine lives.

Zhou looked around at the battle, awed by the fighting skills of the intruders. "Heroes of the Red Flower Society!" he shouted at the top of his voice. "Listen to me!"

By this time, 'Leopard' Wei had taken over from Xu and was fighting Bodyguard Pan. He slackened off slightly as he heard Zhou's shout, but Xu called out: "Careful! Don't be tricked."

Even as he spoke, Pan raised his hoops and struck out at Wei. He was afraid of Iron Gall Manor and the Red Flower Society getting together, and couldn't allow them any opportunity to talk peace.

Xu observed the desperate battle in progress in the hall. The hunchback Zhang Jin was fighting three people at once and was under pressure, although not yet ready to admit defeat. 'Leopard' Wei, meanwhile, was also having difficulty maintaining his defence. Victory, Xu could see, was impossible.

"Set fire to the place, quick!" he shouted to disconcert the Manor people. "Twelfth Brother, go and seal the rear gate. Don't let anyone escape!"

On hearing the shout, Zhou Qi ran for the door of the hall planning to look for the arsonists.

"So you want to escape, do you?" a deep voice outside said as she reached the doorway.

She started backwards in fright. In the flickering candlelight, she saw two men blocking the doorway. The face of the one who had spoken looked as though it was covered with a layer of frost. Gleaming shafts emerged from his two eyes, sapping the life from those they fixed upon. Zhou Qi wanted to look at the other man, but she found her eyes caught by the first man's stare.

"Holy Ghost," she cursed softly.

"That's right," he replied. "I'm 'Melancholy Ghost'." It was the Red Flower Society's Superintendent of Punishments, 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi. There was no warmth in his words. Zhou Qi had never been afraid of anything before but she shuddered at the sight of this sinister man.

"Do you think I'm afraid of you?" she shouted to bolster her own courage, and struck out at him with her sword.

The man countered with his own sword, his eyes still fixed on her, and in only a few moves, he had completely mastered her.

On the other side of the hall, Meng was battling Zhang Jin, but it had already become obvious that he was no match for him. Tong, meanwhile, had not been sighted for some time. Only Zhou, fighting against Xu and Wei, had managed to gain the upper hand, but just as he was on the point of winning, someone else leapt forward shouting: "I'll fight you, old man!"

He was using an iron oar as a weapon. It swung up from behind the man's back, over his right shoulder and smashed down towards Zhou with astonishing ferocity. The man was 'Crocodile' Jiang, thirteenth in the Red Flower Society's heirarchy.

Zhou noticed Jiang's great strength and dodged to the left, then began to retreat as he fought, keeping constantly on the move. He spotted Bodyguard Pan being chased by 'Iron Pagoda' Yang, and as Pan ran close by him, Zhou struck out at him with his great sword.

Zhou knew that the Red Flower Society's misunderstanding of the situation was deep, and could not be explained away with just a few words. Furthermore, his several attempts to halt the battle had been sabotaged by Pan. With the Red Flower Society's fighters became increasingly numerous, and fighting more and more fiercely, it was only a matter of time before someone was wounded, if not killed, and when that happened, the misunderstanding would become a matter of true vengeance and the situation would be irretrievable.

Seeing Zhou's sword slicing towards him, Pan started in terror and frantically dodged out of the way. He fully realised Zhou's intention.

"We joined forces to capture Wen Tailai but it was you who killed him," he shouted at Zhou. "What are you planning now? You want to murder me and keep the whole Manchu reward for yourself, is that it?"

Zhang Jin howled and smashed his wolf's tooth club at Zhou's thigh. But Xu, who was more attentive, finally realised what was happening. Fighting with Zhou earlier, he had noticed how the old man had several times stayed his hand, and he knew there had to be a reason for it. "Tenth Brother!" he shouted. "Not so fast!"

Zhang Jin's blood lust was up, however, and he paid no attention. 'Copper-head' Jiang's iron oar swung forward, aimed at Zhou's midriff. Zhou leant to one side to avoid it, but unexpectedly, Yang swung his steel whip down towards his shoulder from behind. He heard the gust of wind behind his ear and blocked the blow with his sword, causing both Yang's and his own arm to go numb for a second. The physical strength of the three society fighters was frightening, and battling all three single-handed, it was obvious that Zhou was gradually being worn down. Then Jiang's iron oar struck upwards at Zhou's great sword: Zhou lost his grasp, and the sword flew up out of his hand and stuck straight into a beam in the roof of the hall.

The Red Flower Society fighters pressed in closer around Zhou, now weaponless, and Zhang Jin and Jiang's weapons smashed down towards him. Zhou quickly picked up a table and heaved it at the two of them. As he did so, the candleholder on the table fell to the floor and the flame went out.

In a flash of inspiration, Meng pulled out a catapult and "pa, pa, pa!" shot out a string of pellets at the other candles, extinguishing them all.

An inky blackness descended on the hall.