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Putting aside thoughts of home, Chen rode back to the society's mansion near Hangzhou where he found everyone gathered around 'Melancholy Ghost' Shi who had just arrived from Beijing. Shi immediately broke free from the group and bowed before Chen.

"I found out in Beijing that the Emperor had come south, and travelled day and night to get here to tell you only to find that the brothers had not only seen him, but had clashed with his men as well," he said.

"You've had a hard trip, Twelfth Brother," replied Chen. "Did you hear any other news while you were there?"

"Once I heard about the Emperor, I disregarded everything else," Shi said.

Chen noticed his haggard look and guessed he was worn out after the hard ride. "Go and get a good sleep. We'll talk again later," he said.

Shi bowed and walked off. As he passed Luo Bing, he said: "That white horse of yours is very fast. But don't worry, I took good care of him...Oh," He stopped again. "I also saw the horse's former owner, Han Wenchong, on the road."

"What? Did he want his horse back?"

"He didn't see me. I came across him in an inn in Yangzhou with several lead escorts from the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency. I heard them cursing our Red Flower Society, so I went across and eaves-dropped. They called us low and vulgar, and said we had killed that fellow Tong Zhaohe."

'Mastermind' Xu and Zhou Qi smiled at each other. "What is the Zhen Yuan Agency up to this time?" Xu asked.

"I gathered that they were escorting a consignment of treasures presented by the Emperor to the Chen family of Haining." He turned to Chen. "It was for your family, Great Helmsman, so I told the local society leader to quietly make sure it was delivered safely."

"Thank you," Chen replied, smiling. "For once we can work together with the Zhen Yuan Agency."

"The head of the agency is with them, which is an indication of the importance they attach to the consignment."

Chen and the others gasped at the news that the North China Earth-Shaker Wang Weiyang was escorting the consignment personally.

"Wang hasn't escorted a consignment for more than ten years," said Lord Zhou. "Great Helmsman, your family obviously has great prestige."

"I thought it strange too," added Shi. "But later I heard that apart from the valuables for the Great Helmsman's family, they were also carrying a pair of jade vases."

"Jade vases?" Chen asked.

"Yes, treasures from the Muslim regions. The Muslims scored a victory over General Zhao Wei's army, but with the Manchu forces so powerful, they can't hold out for much longer. So they have sent the vases as a peace offering."

The heroes excitedly asked Shi for details of the Muslims' victory.

"I heard that General Zhao Wei's troops starved for several days as a result of us stealing their rations, and finally had to retreat. The Muslims organised an ambush on the road and killed two or three thousand of them." The heroes clapped and laughed.

"The Manchu army finally received more supplies," Shi continued. "It began to advance again, but I didn't hear any further news. When the Muslim envoys arrived in Beijing, the court officials didn't dare to make a decision, and sent him and the vases down south for the Emperor to dispose of."

"The vases won't make any difference," Chen said. "No matter what valuable treasures they send, he will never agree to peace."

"I heard the agency men say that if peace was agreed to, the vases would be kept. If not, they will have to be returned, so it is vital that they not be damaged in any way."

Chen glanced at Xu, and the two walked away from the main group into a side chamber.

"Brother Xu, last night I saw the Emperor. He said that he would be returning to Beijing in three days' time, and that before he left he intended to kill Fourth Brother."

"Then we'd better start making arrangements to save him immediately," Xu replied.

"The Emperor is probably not back in Hangzhou yet, and most of their top fighters are with him, so it should be relatively easy to rescue him if we move fast."

"The Emperor isn't in Hangzhou?"

Chen told him about their meeting in Haining. Xu fiddled meditatively with the pens and paper on the tabletop in front of them.

"The only plan I can see at the moment is to steal the jade vases," Xu said finally. "Since the Emperor has already sent a huge army out west, he is certain to be unwilling to talk peace, which means he will have to return the vases. If he is unable to, his word will lose all credibility, and the Emperor, as we know, is obsessed with his own prestige."

"Once we have the jade vases, we can go to him and say that if he touches one hair on Fourth Brother's head, we will smash them," Chen added.

"Exactly! Even if we can't exchange the vases for Fourth Brother, we can at least postpone things for a few days which will also be of benefit to Master Muzhuolun and his Muslims."

"All right," said Chen. "Then we attack this North China Earth-Shaker, Wang Weiyang."

Wang Weiyang was sixty-nine years old. The Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency, which he had built up with his own hands, had prospered in north China for more than thirty years in spite of strong and sometimes violent opposition, and there was a saying in the fighting community: 'It is better to bump into the Devil than into old Wang.' He planned to retire the following year in the expectation of living to a venerable old age, but when the agency was entrusted with the task of escorting the jade vases to the Emperor, he decided to accompany the consignment personally. In light of the diplomatic sensitivity of the mission, he did not dare to be neglectful. From each of his agency branches, he detailed six top fighters, while the court also supplied four Imperial Bodyguards and twenty Imperial Guardsmen to accompany the Muslim envoy on his journey south. Precautions along the way were most strict, and there had been no incidents of any kind.

Noon was approaching as they arrived at a town less than three miles from Hangzhou. The agency men went into the largest restaurant and ordered food, and were jubilantly discussing how they planned to celebrate once they got to Hangzhou when a horse neighed outside.

Lead Escort Han pricked up his ears and ran out to find his own beloved white steed walking slowly past with a heavy load of firewood on its back. He tried to grab the reins, but the peasant with the horse gave the animal a rap on the rump and it cantered off down the street. Unwilling to give up, Han ran after them. Once outside the town, the horse turned off the road and galloped into the trees with Han following as best as he could.

"Brother Han's gone crazy thinking about that white horse of his," said another of the lead escorts with a smile. "Every time he sees a horse on the road with even a couple of white hairs, he has to chase after it to see if it's his. When he gets home tomorrow and sees his old lady's snow-white skin, I expect he'll probably think she's his horse and immediately jump..."

The others exploded into laughter.

Just then, one of the waiters suddenly called out: "Master Liang, please sit over here."

A man with the appearance of a rich merchant entered with four servants behind him, one of them carrying a water pipe. He seated himself at a table and a waiter hurried round pouring him a cup of tea and chattering: "Try this Dragon's Well tea, Master Liang. It's made with fresh spring water brought in only yesterday."

Liang grunted and said in a voice thick with the accent of Hanzhou: "Bring me a few slices of meat, a bowl of eel soup and three catties of the best rice wine."

The waiter bowed and a moment later, the fragrance of hot wine assailed their noses as he returned with a large flask.

"What is Brother Han doing away so long?" Master Wang Weiyang asked.

Suddenly the main door of the restaurant was kicked open, and a dwarf shuffled in followed by a girl and a strong young man, all three dressed in rough clothes.

The dwarf bowed in all four directions and announced: "I am a humble travelling player who can do a few tricks to make you laugh. If you are impressed, please make a contribution. If you are not, please accept my apologies."

He picked up a teacup from a table and covered it with his tattered cap. "Change!" he shouted, and whisked the cap away: the cup had disappeared. He waved the cap around to show that the cup was not inside.

Intrigued, Master Liang stood up and walked over to get a closer look.

"May I borrow your snuff box, sir?" the dwarf asked him. Liang laughed and handed the snuff box over. The dwarf placed it in his cap and made it disappear in the same way.

"That snuff box is very precious," one of Liang's servants warned. "Don't damage it now."

The dwarf smiled. "Please look in your pocket, sir," he replied. The servant felt around in his coat pocket and pulled out the snuff box.

Liang and his servants were amazed, and so were the Lead Escorts and Imperial Guardsmen. All crowded round to watch the dwarf's conjuring. Liang pulled a jade ring off his left hand and handed it to him saying: "Make this disappear too."

The dwarf put the ring on the table, covered it with his cap and blew on it.

"Alter east and transpose west, Topsy-turvy like the rest!" he shouted and whipped away the cap. The ring had disappeared. The onlookers gasped.

"Please feel in your pocket, master," the dwarf said, and Liang pulled the ring out and stared at it in surprise.

"Excellent, excellent!" he cried.

Several dozen people had entered the restaurant by this time, to see what was going on, including a number of army officers.

"What's so special about a trick like that?" one of the officers said. "Let's see if you dare to make this disappear." He slapped an official document down on the table and the onlookers saw it was marked "Urgent dispatch for Master Wang, Beijing Military Bureau", underneath which was written "Zhejiang Provincial Commander-in-chief Li".

"Please don't be offended, sir," the dwarf replied. "I may earn my living in a rather casual way, but I would never dare to touch an urgent official dispatch."

"What does it matter?" Liang said to the dwarf. "It's just a game. Go on, make it disappear." He turned to his servants. "Give me five taels of silver," he said. One of the servants pulled an ingot of silver from a bag and handed it to Liang who placed it on the table. "If you make the dispatch disappear, this silver ingot is yours," he said to the dwarf.

The dwarf looked at the ingot, then turned and held a whispered conversation with the girl.

"I have found some more courage," he finally said. He covered the document with his cap and shouted "Change! Change!" His hand pointed to left and right, up and down, and settled on the leather case that contained the jade vases. "In! In! Go into the case!" he roared. He picked up the cap, and the document had indeed disappeared.

"He's got quite a talent, this Turtle," the officer commented. The dwarf bowed before Master Liang.

"Thank you for your contribution," he said, then picked up the ingot and handed it to the girl standing behind him. The crowd clapped in approval.

"All right, now give me the dispatch back," said the officer.

The dwarf smiled. "It's in the leather case. Please open it and look," he replied. All the agency men jumped in shock as he spoke. The case was sealed with the Imperial seal, and none dared to break it open. The officer went over and felt the case with his hand.

"Excuse me, my man," said Wang Weiyang. "That is a treasure belonging to the Imperial court. It cannot be touched."

"You must be joking," the officer replied and continued to feel the case.

"Who's joking with you? Back off a bit!" one of the Imperial Guardsmen warned.

"Yes sir," the officer said. "But please return the dispatch to me, sir."

"Enough of your tricks!" the guardsman shouted at the dwarf. "Give him back the dispatch, quickly!"

"It's in the leather case. If you don't believe me, open it and see," said the dwarf.

The officer flew into a rage and punched him on the shoulder. "Hand it over!" he roared.

The dwarf put on a sorrowful expression. "I dare not deceive you," he said. "The dispatch is inside the leather case, but I cannot spirit it out again!"

Master Liang walked over to the Imperial Guardsman. "What is your honourable surname, sir?" he asked politely.

"My surname is Lin."

"Master Lin, these marketplace scoundrels have no sense of propriety. Please take a hand in this matter and return the dispatch to him."

"This case is the property of the Emperor," Lin replied. "Who would dare to open it without the Emperor's permission?"

Master Liang frowned, as if in a quandary.

"If you don't return that dispatch to me, you will be guilty of delaying important government business which is a capital offence," said the officer. "What do you say brothers?"

Seated around the room were another dozen or so army officers and men who began to edge towards Lin.

Wang Weiyang, with his decades of experience, felt there was something strange about the scene. He guessed that the dwarf was the key to the affair and stretched out his hand to grab his arm. The dwarf shrank away, crying: "Master, master, have mercy on me!"

Wang noted the dwarf's agility and became even more suspicious. He was just about to chase after him when the military men began brawling with the lead escorts and Imperial Guardsmen. He clutched the leather case to his chest and a lead escort stood guard on either side of him. The Guardsman Lin pulled out his dagger and slammed into the table.

"Enough of this!" he roared. "Back off, all of you!"

The army officer drew his sword. "If you don't return the document, I'll finish you off even if I die doing it!" he shouted. "Brothers! All together!"

He lunged forward and clashed with Lin. The other army men drew their weapons and charged into the fray and a great battle ensued. Guardsman Lin was one of the best fighters in the Imperial Guard, but after a few strokes he found this lowly army officer gaining the upper hand.

Wang Weiyang shouted repeatedly for them all to stop but no-one listened. In the midst of the confusion, another group suddenly surged in through the door and someone commanded: "Seize the trouble-makers!"

The army men all stopped where they were. Guardsman Lin took a deep breath and saw that a young official had entered surrounded by several dozen soldiers. He and immediately recognized the man as the Emperor's favorite, Fu Kangan, who held the posts of military governor of Manchuria, commander-in-chief of the Nine Gates of Beijing as well as commander of the Imperial Guard. Lin hastily pushed his way forward and greeted Fu as the other Imperial Guardsmen bowed before him.

"What's going here?" the official asked.

"They started making trouble, Commander," Lin replied, and gave an account of what had occurred.

"And where is the magician?" the official asked. The dwarf, who had hidden himself in a far corner, now came forward.

"This is a very strange business," the official said. "You will all come with me to Hangzhou. I wish to conduct a thorough investigation."

"Yes, sir. A wise decision, sir," said Lin.

"Let us go," the official said, then walked outside and remounted his horse. The soldiers under his command gathered together the agency men,

the army officer that had started the trouble and even the Muslim envoy and herded them out after him.

"Master Fu," said Lin to the official. "This is the head of the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency, Wang Weiyang."

Wang went over and bowed in greeting, but the official merely glanced at him once from head to foot and grunted. "Let's go," he said.

The column of men entered Hangzhou city and made its way to a huge private residence by the West Lake.

"This must be where the commander is staying," Wang thought to himself. "Being the Emperor's favorite, it's not surprising he has such a strong force of men with him."

They entered the rear hall of the residence. "Please be seated," the official said to Guardsman Lin, and continued on into an inner chamber by himself.

A short while later, an Imperial Guard officer came out and escorted the army officer who had started the trouble, the conjuring dwarf, Master Liang and his servants inside.

"I was getting a bit worried during that brawl," said one of the lead escorts. "There was something funny about those army men. I thought they might try to damage the jade vases."

"Yes, their kung fu was surprisingly good for army officers," Guardsman Lin replied. "It's lucky Commander Fu turned up or we may have had some trouble."

"Commander Fu's Inner Strength Kung Fu is superb," said Wang Weiyang. "It's very unusual for such a senior nobleman to be so accomplished in the martial arts."

"What?" said Lin. "Commander Fu's kung fu is good? How do you know?"

"You can see it in his eyes."

As they were talking, an officer came out. "Wang Weiyang of the Zhen Yuan Bodyguard Agency, come with me," he said. Wang stood up and followed him out.

They passed through two courtyards and into another hall in which sat Commander Fu Kangan on a dais. He had changed into an official gown with a huge plume in his cap, and the imposing atmosphere was enhanced by

the long official desk in front of him and the many Imperial Guardsmen standing on either side.

As he walked in, two officers shouted in unison: "Kneel!" Wang did as he was told.

"So you're Wang Weiyang, are you?" Fu said shortly.

"I am sir," said Wang.

"I hear you have the nickname 'North China Earth Shaker'."

"That is just what some of my friends call me."

"Both the Emperor and I live in Beijing," Fu said coldly. "Are you suggesting you can shake us off our feet too?"

Wang felt a sudden wave of fear. He hastily kowtowed and said: "This humble person would not dare. I will immediately do away with the nickname."

"Such insolence!" Fu roared. "Take him away!"

Two soldiers marched up and led him off, and Wang, in spite of his kung fu skills, did not dare to resist.

The Imperial Guardsmen and lead escorts were brought in one after the other, and one after another they were taken away and thrown manacled into the dungeons. Finally, an army officer marched up to Fu's table carrying the leather box in both hands, knelt down on one knee and raised it above his head in presentation, saying: "Commander Fu, here are the jade vases."

Fu laughed out loud, and stepped down off the dais. The dwarf and the others kneeling on the ground also stood up and began laughing.

"Seventh Brother," Fu said to the dwarf. "You truly deserve the nickname Kung Fu Mastermind!"

The conjuring dwarf was in fact 'Mastermind' Xu, while the Hangzhou Helmsman, Master Ma, had played the part of Master Liang. Chen had taken the role of his double, the Emperor's favorite, Fu Kangan, and the Twin Knights and some of the other heroes had played the trouble-making army officers.

Xu had remembered that Han Wenchong would be able to recognize the heroes and so had arranged for him to be lured away using the white horse as bait into the forest where he had been seized.

Chen broke the seal on the leather box and lifted the lid. Inside were a pair of jade vases about one foot in height. On each was drawn the picture of a beautiful girl dressed in Muslim clothes, her hair plaited in a long queue.

The girl was stunningly attractive with bewitching eyes and cherry-red lips that almost seemed to move. She looked as if she was about to walk out of the picture.

Everyone gathered round and voiced their admiration for the vases.

"When I saw Huo Qingtong, I thought she was certainly the most beautiful girl under heaven," added Luo Bing. "But this girl is even more lovely."

"It's just a picture," Zhou Qi protested. "You don't think there's really anyone that beautiful, do you?"

"I don't think the artist could have invented such a face," Luo Bing replied.

"Let's bring the Muslim envoy in and ask him," Xu suggested.

As he entered, the envoy bowed respectfully before Chen, in the belief that he was a senior court official.

"You have had a long hard journey, sir," said Chen. "What is your name?"

"My name is Kaibiexing. May I ask your name?"

Chen smiled but did not reply.

"This is General Li, Commander-in-chief of Zhejiang Province," said Xu.

The others stared at him in surprise, wondering what he had in mind.

"I trust Master Muzhuolun is well?" Chen said to the envoy.

"Thank you for asking, Commander. Our leader is very well."

"I wonder if you could tell me, sir, who is this beautiful girl on the vases? Is it a real person, or did the artist draw it from his own imagination?"

"The vases originally belonged to Master Muzhuolun's daughter. The girl in the picture is her."

"Is she Huo Qingtong's elder or younger sister?" Zhou Qi asked.

The envoy was surprised. "Do you know her, miss?"

"I have met her," she replied.

Chen wanted to ask about how Huo Qingtong was, but stopped himself. "Please go and rest now," he said to the envoy. "We will talk again later."

The envoy bowed. "Thank you, Commander. Where shall the vases be kept?"

"We have other arrangements," said Chen.

The envoy was led away.