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'Mastermind' Xu went later to see the Muslim envoy.

"I will take you to see the Emperor," he said, and they left, accompanied by Meng carrying the leather box containing the vases. Unknown to the envoy, one of the vases had been removed.

When they arrived at the Commander-in-Chief's Yamen, Meng handed the leather box to the envoy and pointed to the main gate.

"Go in on your own," he said.

That afternoon, an attendant handed a visiting card to Great Helmsman Chen. It was signed 'Your servant Deng Tunan', the trusted lieutenant of Commander Li Keshou.

"Your plan has probably worked, Brother Xu," Chen said. "Brother Wei, please go and receive him."

'Leopard' Wei went to the reception room and saw a robust military official seated in a chair. "What is it you wish to see our master about, Master Deng?" he asked.

"I have come with instructions from Commander-in-Chief Li to see the Great Helmsman of your society to discuss a certain matter with him," Deng replied.

"Our master is not free at present. It is the same if you talk to me."

"It concerns a Muslim vase," he said.

Wei frowned enquiringly.

"The Muslims dispatched an envoy with a pair of vases to plead for peace. But when the Emperor opened the box, only one of the vases was inside. He was very angry and questioned the envoy, who said that he had already had an audience with the Commander-in-Chief of Zhejiang Province. The Emperor called in Commander Li, who was naturally mystified. Luckily, the Emperor knew Commander Li would not do such a thing, that there must be some good explanation."

"That is good," said Wei, nodding.

"But the Emperor said that Commander Li would be held responsible for the affair and gave him three days to find and return the other vase. This presents a great difficulty."

"He's afraid that if he doesn't find the vase, he will be removed from office, is that it? It's probably easier not being an official. If one's whole family could to be executed and all one's possessions seized, it must be rather distressing."

Deng ignored his sarcasm. "Let us not deceive each other. I have come to ask your society to return the vase."

"We have not heard of any such vase," replied Wei. "But as Commander Li has encountered this difficulty, there is no reason why we shouldn't help him find it. We may possibly come across some clue to its whereabouts in a year or two."

"Commander Li said he had great respect for Master Chen. He sent me today to ask your assistance, but would not feel at ease if he was unable to do anything in return. Please do not hesitate to inform us of Master Chen's wishes."

"You are very frank, General Deng. That is excellent," Wei replied. "Our Master Chen has two wishes. Firstly, the Red Flower Society has offended Commander Li, and he would like to ask him to let bygones be bygones."

"That goes without saying. I can guarantee that the Commander will never make difficulties for your society over this matter. And the second thing?"

"Our Fourth Brother Wen Tailai is imprisoned in the Commander's Yamen."

Deng grunted.

"He is an Imperial criminal," Wei continued. "No matter how courageous Commander Li is, he would never dare to release him. We understand that. But Master Chen misses him greatly and would like to see him alone tonight."

Deng thought for a second. "This is an extremely serious matter. I will have to ask the Commander and return with the reply."

Deng returned two hours later.

"The Commander says that Master Wen's crimes are serious in the extreme, and that normally no-one would be allowed to visit him," he said.

"Normally!" Wei exclaimed.

"But as Master Chen has agreed to return the vase, the Commander will risk his neck and allow Master Chen to see him. However, there are two small conditions he must agree to. First, the Commander has recklessly

agreed to this purely in order to cement his friendship with Master Chen. If anyone else found out about it, it would be disastrous."

"Commander Li wants Master Chen to agree not to reveal a word about the affair to anyone, is that it?"

"Exactly."

"I can agree to that on our Master's behalf," Wei said.

"The second point is that only Master Chen will be allowed to make the visit."

Wei smiled. "Commander Li is naturally afraid that we will take advantage of the opportunity to try to rescue Master Wen. All right, we agree. Master Chen will go by himself. But we have not agreed not to attempt a rescue."

"You are a good man, Brother Wei, and I value your word. Please ask Master Chen to come to the Yamen this evening."

"If Zhang Zhaozhong is around when Master Chen and Master Wen meet, it will naturally be impossible to preserve the secrecy of the agreement, which could be extremely inconvenient for Commander Li."

"That is true," Deng replied. "The Commander will think of some excuse for getting him away."

When Deng had left, the heroes gathered in the Great Hall to await their orders for Wen's rescue.

"Brother Xu, I will leave the arrangements to you," Chen said.

Xu was silent for a moment. "Now that we know Zhang Zhaozhong will be elsewhere and that the Great Helmsman can get inside, it will of course be much easier to rescue Brother Wen," he said. "But Li is also certain to prepare for that eventuality. We must first work out what he plans to do and then do something unexpected."

"He will gather a large contingent of troops and surround the entrance to the dungeon and may even enlist the support of some Imperial Bodyguards," Yang pointed out. "They will allow only the Great Helmsman in, and only the Great Helmsman out."

"We had better be waiting outside the Yamen just in case the Turtles try anything against the Great Helmsman," said one of the Twin Knights.

"We will of course be waiting outside," answered Xu. "But I don't think Li will dare to harm the Great Helmsman with the vase in our hands."

"I've got it," Chen said suddenly. "When I go to see Fourth Brother, I will wear a wide cape and a large hat with a face cover..."

Xu knew what he meant. "But that way, we would gain one man only to lose another. It's not a good idea."

"Finish what you were saying, Great Helmsman," said Priest Wu Chen.

"Once I am in the dungeon, I will exchange clothes with Fourth Brother and then let him leave. The guards will think it is me. You can be waiting outside to receive him."

"But what about you?"

"The Emperor and I have a special relationship. Once they discover the switch, they will let me go."

The heroes were unhappy that their leader was placing himself in such danger, but they were forced to agree it was probably the best plan.

All the arrangements were completed. Chen threw on a large cape with the collar turned up, pulled a hat well down over his face, and set off for the Commander-in-Chief's Yamen accompanied by 'Leopard' Wei. By the time they arrived, it was already close to dusk and the first stars had begun to appear at the edge of the sky. A man came out to meet them.

"Is that Master Chen?" he whispered. Wei nodded. "Please come with me. This other gentleman, please stay here."

Wei stood and watched as Chen followed the man into the Yamen. A flight of ravens flew overhead through the evening mist on their way home, cawing as they went, and Wei's heart beat wildly as he wondered what would happen to the Great Helmsman. After a while, the rest of the heroes arrived and spread out around the Yamen.

As he entered the gate, Chen saw the Yamen was filled with thousands of soldiers on guard. The man led him through three courtyards and into a room.

"Please take a seat," he said, and left. A moment later, Commander Li entered and saluted Chen. "It is an honour to meet you," he said.

Chen opened his cape and revealed his face. "We met the day before yesterday on the lake," he answered with a smile.

"You may now see the prisoner," said Li. "Please follow me."

As they reached the door, an attendant rushed breathlessly towards them.

"Commander, the Emperor has arrived," he reported. "Master Deng has gone out to meet him."

Li started in surprise and turned to Chen. "You had better wait here for a while," he said.

Li ran through to the front courtyard and saw Qian Long with a large contingent of Imperial Guardsmen. He hurriedly knelt down before him and kowtowed.

"Arrange a well-guarded room," said Qian Long. "I want to personally interrogate Wen Tailai."

Li invited the Emperor into his own study, and the Imperial Bodyguards established themselves on all sides of the study and even on the roof.

"I have important matters of a confidential nature to discuss with this prisoner. No-one else must hear," Qian Long told Bodyguard Bai Zhen.

"Yes, Your Highness," Bai replied and retired.

A moment later, four bodyguards entered carrying a stretcher on which Wen, handcuffed and chained, lay asleep. The bodyguards retired and there was silence for a time.

"How are your injuries?" Qian Long asked. Wen's eyes opened and he sat up. His wounds had not yet healed, but his mind was clear. He had seen Qian Long once before when he had entered the Imperial Palace with Master Yu, but was surprised at suddenly meeting him again in Hangzhou.

"I'm not dead yet," he said coldly.

"I asked my men to invite you to come to see me because there is something I wish to discuss with you."

Wen grunted.

"When you visited me with that leader of yours, Master Yu, I discussed an important matter with him. Unfortunately, I hear he became ill and died very soon afterwards. It was a great pity."

"If Master Yu had not died, I expect he would be imprisoned here with me," replied Wen.

Qian Long laughed. "You underworld fighters, you're very frank. You say whatever you are thinking. Now, Master Wen, I have only one question for you. Answer me honestly, and I will immediately release you."

"Release me? Ha! Do you think I am a three-year-old child? I know that you cannot eat or sleep easy knowing that I'm still alive. You have stayed your hand until today only because you wish to question me."

"You're much too suspicious," said Qian Long with a smile. He walked forward two paces.

"Did Master Yu tell you what it was he talked to me about?" he asked.

"What did you talk about?"

Qian Long stared at him, and Wen returned the gaze unflinchingly. After a while, Qian Long turned his head away.

"About my origins," he said quietly.

"He didn't say. You are the Emperor, the son of the late Emperor and Empress. Everyone knows about your origins. What more is there to say?"

Qian Long breathed a sigh of relief. "That night you visited me, you must have known what the reason was?"

"Master Yu said that he had helped you once over some important matter. The Red Flower Society was short of funds and he went to ask you for three million taels of silver. But you refused the request, and have even had me seized. If I ever get out of this, I will reveal how ungrateful you are."

Qian Long laughed out loud. He glanced at Wen: his anger did not appear to be a pretence. "If that is the case, I had better have you killed," he said, half-believing him. "Otherwise, if I let you go, it could damage my reputation."

"Why didn't you kill me earlier? If you had, you wouldn't have had to harbour such evil schemes against your mother."

"What about my mother?" Qian Long asked, turning pale.

"You understand."

"So you know everything?"

"No, not everything. Master Yu said the Empress Dowager knew he had helped you and had asked you to repay him, but that you were still unwilling to part with the silver. You have mountains of money. Three million taels should be nothing to you. But you insist on being petty."

Qian Long laughed nervously. He pulled out a handkerchief and wiped away the beads of sweat on his brow. He paced the room to steady himself, then smiled. "You show no fear at all before the Emperor. You are indeed a man of steel," he said.

"What have I to be afraid of? I doubt if you would dare to kill me," said Wen.

"Wouldn't dare?"

"You want to kill me because you're afraid your secret will be revealed but as soon as you kill me, your secret will be impossible to keep."

"Can dead men talk?"

"As soon as I die, someone will open a certain letter and reveal the evidence to the world. Then you will be in a real predicament."

"What letter?" Qian Long asked.

"Before we went to the palace to see you, Master Yu wrote down every detail of the affair and sealed the document in an envelope together with two important pieces of evidence and left it with a friend."

"Was he afraid that something untoward might happen?"

"Of course. How could he trust you? Master Yu told his friend that if we were both to die suddenly, he should open the letter and do what it said, but if one of us was still alive, not to open it under any circumstances. Master Yu has already passed away, so I don't think you'll dare to kill me."

Qian Long wrung his hands, anxiety written all over his face.

"Wouldn't it be worth spending three million taels of silver to buy that letter and the two pieces of evidence?" Wen asked.

"The silver? I had always planned to hand it over and then release you. Write a letter to your friend telling him to bring the letter to me and I will immediately pay up the money."

"Ha, ha. Once I tell you his name, you can send your bodyguards to kill or capture him. Actually, I'm very comfortable here. I would be happy to stay the rest of my life. You and I have the same fate. If I die first, you won't live much longer."

Qian Long bit his lip. "If you won't write the letter, it is of no importance," he said after a pause. "I will give you two days. If you persist in being stubborn, I will have no alternative but to kill you. No-one else will know about it and your friend will think you're still alive. And even if I don't kill you, I can still have your eyes gouged out, your tongue removed, your arms cut off...Think about it over the next two days."

He pushed open the door and walked out. His bodyguards re-assembled around him, and Commander Li saw him out of the Yamen.

Wen was carried back to the dungeon by the Commander's personal guards with Zhang Zhaozhong providing an escort. Once in the cell, one of the guards handed Zhang a letter.

"Commander Li asked me to give you this," he said. Zhang opened and read the letter, then left.

Wen lay on the bed thinking about his wife and friends. He hoped none of them would be harmed if they should attempt a rescue.

Just then, the iron door to his cell opened with a clang and a man walked in. Wen thought it was Zhang returning and did not open his eyes.

The man walked over to the bed. "Fourth Brother," he said quietly.

Wen was stunned. He looked up and saw it was Chen. "Great Helmsman!" he exclaimed, sitting up.

Chen smiled and nodded. He pulled two steel files from his pocket, and began filing at Wen's manacles. After a few strong strokes, a series of light scratches appeared on the surface, but the file was ruined. The manacles were made of a specially-cast steel brought from the West, and an ordinary file was useless against it.

"Great Helmsman, only the finest of swords could break through these chains and manacles," said Wen.

Chen remembered the battle with Zhang Zhaozhong at the Yellow River crossing and how sharp Zhang's 'Frozen Emerald' sword had been.

"Does Zhang guard you night and day?" he asked quickly.

"He's never more than a step from me. He only left a short while ago."

"Good. We'll wait for him to return and steal his sword." Chen threw the files under the bed.

"It's possible I won't be able to get out of here," Wen said. "The Emperor wants to silence me because he's afraid I will reveal his secret. I had better tell you what it is, Great Helmsman, so that no matter if I live or die, there will be no delay."

Chen nodded.

"The night I went to the Imperial Palace with Master Yu, Qian Long was very surprised to see us. Master Yu said: 'A lady from the Chen family in Haining asked me to come,' and handed him a letter. The Emperor's face went pale as he read it, and he told me to wait outside. The two of them then talked for about two hours before Master Yu finally came out. On the way back, he told me the Emperor was not a Manchu at all, but a Chinese and also your elder brother."

Chen started in shock. "That's impossible," he said firmly. "My brother is in Haining."

"Master Yu said that on the day the Emperor Yong Zheng's wife gave birth to a girl, your mother by coincidence also gave birth to a boy. Yong

Zheng ordered the Chen family's child to be brought for him to look at, and when it was returned, it had become a girl. The boy is now the Emperor Qian Long..."

Before he could finish, they heard the sound of footsteps in the corridor and a guard came in.

"What is it?" asked Chen.

"Master Zhang is returning. Commander Li is unable to detain him further and asks you to leave quickly."

"Thank you," Chen replied. His left hand shot out and touched a Yuedao point on the guard's body. The guard toppled to the floor without a sound, and Chen pushed him under the bed.

"With Zhang on his way, I don't have time to give you all the details," Wen continued. "Master Yu knew the Emperor was Chinese and went to urge him to overthrow the Manchus and restore China to the Chinese while remaining as Emperor himself. Qian Long appeared moved by the appeal, and asked Master Yu to bring evidence before making a decision. But as soon as Master Yu returned home, he fell ill and never recovered. His last wish was that you should be the Great Helmsman, and he said to me that this was a good opportunity for us to restore the honour of the Chinese people. The Emperor is your elder brother. If he is unwilling to overthrow the Manchus, then everyone will support you to take his place."

His words left Chen too stunned to speak. He thought back to when he had first seen Qian Long by the lake and afterwards crying before the tomb of his parents. Could it really be that the Emperor was born of his own mother and father?

"I understand your mother wrote down the full details of how the Emperor Yong Zheng swapped the girl for your brother in a letter which Master Yu gave along with several other pieces of evidence to your teacher, Master Yuan, to look after."

"Ah, so when the Twin Knights went to see my teacher this summer, they were carrying these things to him on Master Yu's orders?"

"That's right. It was so secret that not even you could be told. All that Master Yuan knows is that they are extremely important, but he does not know what they are. Just before Master Yu passed away, he said that after you became Great Helmsman, you should open the letter and make your plans accordingly. But I stupidly allowed myself to be captured and risked the whole enterprise. Great Helmsman, if you can't get me out today, you

must go to the Muslim regions as quickly as possible to see your teacher. You must not endanger the great cause of restoration just for my sake."

Wen was clearly relieved to have completed what he had to say.

He was about to add something when footsteps sounded in the corridor again. He signalled quickly with his hand, and Chen hid under the bed. Wen then draped himself over the side of bed with his head resting on the floor.

Zhang entered the cell, and under the faint light of the room's single candle, saw Wen lying half on the floor as if dead. Shocked, he leapt forward and touched Wen's back, but there was no reaction. He started to lift Wen's body back onto the bed, but as he did so, Wen leapt up and attacked him. Zhang fell back in surprise, felt a sudden numbness in his lower abdomen, and knew he had been hit by someone waiting in ambush under the bed. He roared angrily, sidestepped two paces and suppressed his breathing to control the numbness. Chen, who was startled to see Zhang still standing, leapt out from beneath the bed and struck his face with his fists seven or eight times.

If he responded, Zhang knew his control would be lost and the paralysis in his abdomen would spread. He retreated as Chen's foot flew up and struck another yuedao point. This time, he could not sustain his control. His whole body went limp and he fell to the ground.

Chen searched him and was extremely disappointed to find he did not have the Frozen Emerald sword with him. He pulled a piece of paper out of Zhang's pocket and saw under the candlelight that it was a note from Commander Li asking Zhang to show his sword to an important official who was waiting to see it: this must have been the excuse Li had used to draw Zhang away. He guessed that Zhang had been anxious to get back to the dungeon to resume his guard duties and had left early without the sword.

Chen continued his search of Zhang's body, and suddenly leapt up jubilantly.

"What is it?" Wen asked. Chen held his hand up and displayed a set of keys. He tried one on the manacles and they opened immediately.

Finally freed, Wen exercised his arms and legs as Chen took off his cape and hat.

"Put these on and get out quickly," he said.

"What about you?"

"I'll wait here for a while. You get out."

Wen understood his meaning. "Great Helmsman, I am very grateful for your good intentions, but we cannot do it that way."

"Fourth Brother, you don't understand. I am in no danger if I stay here." He told Wen about how the Emperor and he had sworn an oath to each other.

"It is still impossible,," Wen said.

Chen frowned. "I am the Great Helmsman. All members of the Red Flower Society must follow my orders, is that not correct?"

"Of course."

"Fine. Then this my order. Put these on quickly and get out. The brothers are outside waiting for you."

"This time I am forced to disobey your order," Wen said. "I would prefer to accept whatever penalty you decide upon."

They were deadlocked. Chen pursed his lips and then had an idea.

"Well, we'll have to risk going out together then. Put on his clothes," he said pointing at Zhang.

"Excellent! Why didn't you say so earlier?" Wen exclaimed.

The two stripped Zhang of his clothes and exchanged them for Wen's, then locked the chains and manacles onto him. Zhang shook with rage, his eyes blood-red with hate, but he was unable to utter a sound.

The two walked quietly through the door and along the corridor. As they ascended a flight of stone steps, a bright light assailed their eyes and they saw the whole courtyard was filled with torches. Several dozen soldiers stood with shining spear tips pointed at the dungeon entrance. Behind them were several hundred archers with bows drawn. Commander Li stood with his right hand held high. Once it dropped, the spears and arrows would be loosed, and Chen and Wen would be dead.

Chen stepped back a pace. "How are your wounds?" he whispered to Wen. "Can you charge through?"

"No, my leg is not up to it," Wen replied with a rueful smile. "You go by yourself, Great Helmsman, don't worry about me."

"All right, pretend you're Zhang and we'll see how we do," Chen replied.

Wen pulled his cap down to his eyebrows and strode out. Commander Li's heart sank at the sight of Zhang and Chen together and he assumed that Zhang had arrested him. He turned to his daughter Yuanzhi.

"Give Zhang's sword back to him and distract him so that Chen can get away," he said.

Yuanzhi walked over with the 'Frozen Emerald' sword in her hand and held it out to Wen, positioning herself between the two men.

"Uncle Zhang, here is your sword," she said, giving Chen a slight nudge with her elbow. Wen grunted and moved to accept the sword, and suddenly under the torch light she recognized him.

"Wen Tailai! So you're trying to escape," she cried and thrust the sword at his chest.

Wen feinted to one side and caught the blade with his fingers while his right hand struck out at the Solar Yuedao points on her forehead. Frightened, Yuanzhi tried to retreat a step, but found that with his fingers still holding the sword, she was unable to move an inch. She let go of the sword and tried to slip away, but Wen struck her left shoulder and a bone-splitting pain surged through her. She cried out and squatted down. Looking back, Chen saw Wen was surrounded but he continued to fight fiercely.

"Stop or the archers will shoot," Commander Li roared.

The old wounds on Wen's thigh burst open with the sudden effort and blood poured out. He knew he did not have the strength to break out of the circle of soldiers.

"Great Helmsman, catch the sword and get out!" he shouted. He tried to throw the Frozen Emerald Sword, but with a sudden pain in his shoulder, his hand went limp and the sword fell to the ground only a few feet from him. He had been hit by an arrow.

Chen turned to Commander Li. "Stop shooting!" he shouted. Li waved his hand and the archers stopped.

"Get a doctor quickly to deal with Master Wen's wounds. I'm going," Chen said, and raced out of the Yamen. Following Li's orders, the guards pretended to give chase, without really obstructing him.

Once out of the Yamen, 'Leopard' Wei and Luo Bing came up to meet him. Chen smiled bitterly and shook his head. The eastern sky was already pale as with heavy hearts the heroes returned home.